

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK

MYSTERY STORIES

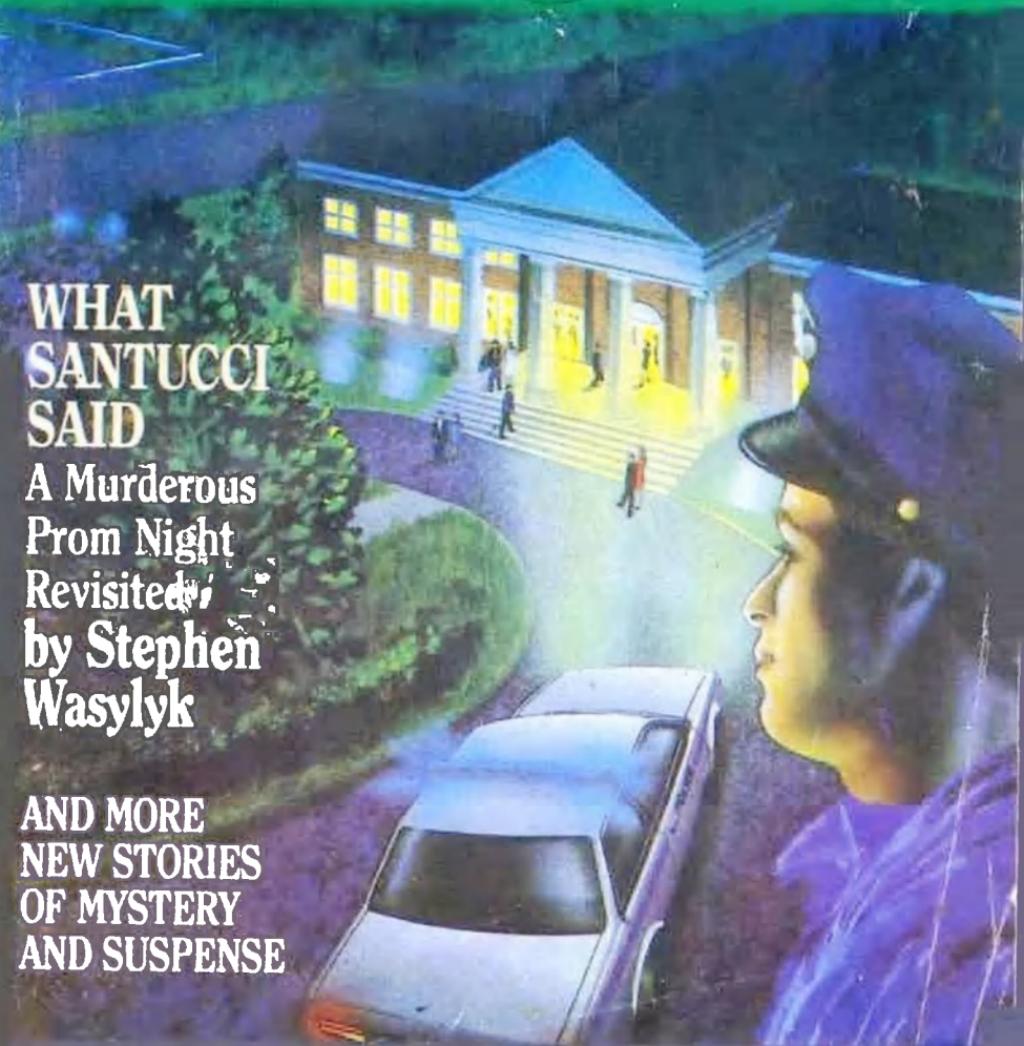


**WHAT
SANTUCCI
SAID**

A Murderous
Prom Night
Revisited,
by Stephen
Wasylyk

AND MORE
NEW STORIES
OF MYSTERY
AND SUSPENSE

MAY 1983



CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES

WHAT SANTUCCI SAID by Stephen Wasylky	5
EXTRA CHEESE, AND I HAVE YOUR COUPON	
by Dan Crawford	24
ANOMALIES OF THE HEART by Ashely Curtis	29
THE WORD OF A DYING MAN by Douglas D. Armstrong	53
BABY, LORRAINE MUST FALL by Mike Drummond	62
THE CATTLEMEN'S CLUB by David Braly	87
PINATUBO'S WAKE by Herb Henson	94
THE PERFECT SOLUTION by Barbara Kennedy	120
FINGERING A KILLER by Malcolm McClintick	131
THE ALIAS by Lawton O'Connor	139
THE HAMBURGER MIND by Evelyn Payne	143

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE SCANDAL DTECTIVES by F.Scott Fitzgerald	152
THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH by Edgar Allan Poe	171

DEPRTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES

3

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MAY, 1993

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Dr. Narendra Choudhry

It's that time of year again - the time for summer holidays and reunion of families and friends. Those who have such events on their calendars would do well to keep in mind "What Santucci Said" in our cover story by great writer Stephen Wasylyk. How do our own classmates stack up? Whether as a matter for future reference or as a check on the present, it could be most interesting.

As a matter of fact, two new authors join us in this issue. shley Curtis, author of "Anomalies of the Heart", is just beginning his writing career, with only one previous story published (in the Yale Literary Magazine some years ago). He and his wife have spent the past four years in Switzerland, where they teach "at an alternative school in a small village in the Bernese Oberland." He has traveled widely, to Kenya, Taiwan, and throughout Western Europe and lived for three years in Italy. He is presently teaching math and physics, but he also has a degree in Chinese language from Yale.

"The Perfect Solution" is Barbara Kennedy's first short story; but she is author of two published novels, *The Uninvited Guest* (Fawcett, 1980) and *The Good Wife* (Ballantine, 1985). She was born in England and is well traveled, being the wife of an army officer. In addition to various places in the United States, she and her husband spent three years in Morocco.

We are, of course, very pleased to have the chance to welcome both of them in these pages. So, have adventure and thrill while you travel in this summer holiday time and have a chance to enjoy it with your near and dear ones.

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FICTION

What Santucci Said

by Stephen Wasylyk

Too confusing



ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

Dolph Hogan frowned at the announcement of the twentieth reunion of his high school graduating class. It was centered on his desk, a reminder that his presence was requested. Fat chance. But like a ghostly memo from his predecessor, it also reminded him of former Police Chief Santucci's theory.

Santucci maintained that your behavior on the night of your graduation prom indicated how you'd conduct the rest of your life.

Hogan had never paid attention to any of Santucci's many theories, but the man had been appointed during the single term of the last Democrat to occupy the White House and had been terminated by a massive heart attack only last year, a goodly span of time in which to accumulate the research that might give this theory, at least, some validity.

He sank into his chair and, in the time-honored pose of deep thinkers everywhere, leaned back with hands clasped behind his neck. Easy enough to see if it held up against the lives of members of his own class.

Fifteen-sixteenths had behaved with some measure of decorum, decency, and sanity and had gone on to do exactly the same while being absorbed

into the faceless, voiceless middle class.

In his case, the theory also couldn't be faulted, even though he hadn't even attended the prom. A transfer from an out-of-state school and a short bout with hepatitis had cost him a full semester, making him a year or two older than his classmates and giving him the mature view that his presence at his recently acquired part-time job as civilian turnkey was far more important. The people in the rather loose civil service system hadn't concerned themselves with his age after he'd presented himself for his job interview. At nineteen going on twenty, he was six four, two hundred pounds, his stomach as flat as a policeman's wallet and his shoulders as broad as a politician's promises.

The experience didn't hurt when he applied for the force on his twenty-first birthday. Twenty years after that prom, here he was in a job that could be considered Chief Turnkey of Them All, only the color of the uniform changed. For the better, according to a bevy of women who whispered to each other that his dark hair went better with navy blue than tan.

He, of course, hadn't been the only one absent.

There was Chester Przowskowitz, who wisely put aside a bout with beer and broads in favor of working the bugs out of a scheme for acquiring developable acreage with other people's money. After gulling a few bankers to go along on some small deals, he'd rocketed into the big money class, manipulating his way to his first million at twenty-five, his name magically becoming more spellable and pronounceable with each million acquired thereafter.

And Melissa Krowder, who spent the evening at her typewriter, was rolling in wealth less than ten years later from a series of one-plot novels about muscular heroes and passionate heroines that were purchased by women who gazed at lonely bedroom ceilings in the middle of the night—married or not—and wondered why that sort of thing never happened to them. They would have never believed that sort of thing had never happened to Melissa, either, or that those volcanic eruptions of sweatless, perfume-permeated passion occurred only in her very fertile imagination.

In a free and open society, unsought and unsolicited information often wanders into the purview of those charged with enforcing the laws, so Hogan

knew they also would have never believed that it would never ever happen to Melissa, who had found true love with her hundred-words-a-minute secretary, Fingers Abuhove. On the other hand, Melissa would have never believed that Fingers had stored onto her very own floppy disc all the catch phrases, titillating adjectives, and delicious adverbs to be recalled at the touch of a key when she embarked on her own writing career, since she felt that while love was fine, money was better.

Several others had passed up the event that supposedly marked their passage into adulthood. Either they couldn't afford it, had no date, didn't give a damn, or had more interesting things to do. They were all in more or less the same position when it came to reunions, and their continued absence could be counted on.

A few, in one way or another, made it a night never to be forgotten, ranging from minor pranks to activities far more serious. At two in the morning, Si Jenkins was taken into custody for driving under the influence when his car careened off six others parked at the curb. On the occasion of this, the twentieth anniversary of the incident, he was serving a term in the county jail for the hit and run

crippling of an elderly woman crossing at an intersection. One of the charges? DUI, of course. Hogan had taken him in himself.

Then there was Alex Merganser, triumphantly leaning on his horn while driving down Main Street at three in the morning with May Hepplewhite's pink panties fluttering from his automobile antenna. At five, he was in the emergency room of the hospital suffering from two black eyes, a broken nose, a couple of missing teeth, and several cracked ribs. In his exuberance over his conquest, he'd forgotten that May had a very large and very muscular brother. While broad-minded enough to feel that what his sister did was her own business, the brother resented her behavior's being advertised so crudely. Ten years later, Merganser's nude, mutilated body was fished from a bay famed for its crabs and clams, the type of mutilation leaving no doubt that once again, in the thrill of the chase and the heat of passion, he'd overlooked someone close to his quarry, this one with no qualms about closing out his chosen career.

All fine for the theory so far, thought Hogan, but nothing is a hundred percent pure, not even the soap that floats. Every rule has an anomaly.

Like Fraser Teal.

The prom had been held at the country club, which sat on top of a hill. The parking lot was at one side of the club, a flat area that had been hollowed out somewhat below the club building so that the landscaped, low-voltage lighted flagstone steps leading down to it afforded a view much like that of a playing field from the stands.

This perspective allowed a half dozen not too inebriated and therefore reliable witnesses to observe Fraser Teal's new white Camaro with the red racing stripes roar down an aisle between the cars and crunch Ronald T. Melrose, one of the faculty members who had acted as a chaperone and who was on his way to his own vehicle. Even the most liberal interpretation couldn't classify this breach of decorum as just another hilarious prank. And when protesting gears ground the Camaro into reverse, sent it back over Mr. Melrose's inert body a second time, and then with screeching tires took off to run over it again before snarling away into the night, the horrified spectators shouted at each other that someone should call the police, which wise spectators have done ever since Good Samaritan lawsuits were introduced.

Some twenty minutes later Fraser's date, Eileen Travant, appeared at the front door of the yellow brick testimonial to her father's success as a textbook publisher, his imitation French chateau. Half hysterical, her expensive off-the-shoulder prom gown ripped revealingly, she sobbed that Fraser had gone crazy and had run over someone and probably killed him and thereafter attacked her. This new revelation intensified the search.

The Camaro was found under a spreading elm that had escaped the developer's chainsaw about a quarter mile down the road from her house, Fraser asleep at the wheel. Shaking, yelling, and cursing at him only lifted him from slumberland to an alcoholic stupor, so he was brought in to sleep it off in a cell before the wheels of justice began the slow process of grinding him flatter than one of his mother's breakfast pancakes.

Only so much could be overlooked on prom night.

At two in the morning, Hogan turned the key on him after removing his belt and shoelaces. At seven, he brought him coffee and wakened him.

Fraser groaned, looked around, held his head, and said, "Where am I?"

"In jail," said Hogan.

Fraser winced and smiled at him. "Hey, man," he said. "You missed a helluva party. I wish I could remember it."

"Don't worry," said Hogan. "You'll be surprised at how many people are going to refresh your memory."

The hassle over the appropriate charges to be filed took three days as the D.A. searched for those that encompassed a drunk's not only running a man down but repeating the process twice more. That indicated a bit of malice aforethought, drunk or sober. Then there was the problem of Eileen's violation, which Mr. Travant demanded come first, since he cared more for his daughter than for a second-rate history teacher, until the D.A. pointed out that while Fraser wasn't too drunk to set a car into motion in the general direction he wished to go, a good defense attorney would claim that he was too far gone to do the same regarding a young woman who was strong, healthy, and could have decked him with a swipe of her lacy handkerchief.

Fraser served seven years. He was now a not-too-successful insurance broker under the watchful eye of the police chief a hundred miles away in Wrightsville. A man who revered his teachers, the chief

neither forgot nor forgave. Ever. It was extremely unlikely that Fraser's prom night experience of killing someone would ever be repeated.

Fraser, thought Hogan, was the exception that proved the rule.

He crumpled the invitation into a ball, tossed it in the general direction of his wastebasket, and decided it was time for his mid-morning visit to the hotel coffee shop down the street. Not that there wasn't a pot always brewing in the outer office, but that coffee didn't come served with a cream doughnut by a waitress in a tight skirt and low-cut silk blouse. Rank has its privileges.

He used the back entrance and the small street that ran behind the shops, thinking it ironic that the chief of police had to sneak past odiferous trash cans and small dumpsters to avoid the front of the shop owned by the woman with whom he'd been sleeping lately because she'd assumed that dallying with her affections gave her the proprietary right to divert his life into channels of her choosing.

Like all great plans, it was frustrated by the unexpected in the form of bloody-aproned Angelo Ciccio, the proprietor of Angie's Select Meats. People who knew never bought the

prepackaged stuff at the supermarket. They went to Angie's where all animal body parts were always slapped down on the butcher's block with a loud *splat* to emphasize that what you were about to receive was *freshly cut to order*. At a special price, of course.

Angelo chose the precise moment of Hogan's passage to kick aside a half-dozen meowing stray gourmet cats, empty a smelly bucket of entrails or something equally appealing to the feline palate into his dumpster, and clang the lid tightly closed while the cats howled and milled around on stiff legs, tails raised like the signs of a furry protest group whose rights had been violated.

The clang and Angelo's booming, "Howsa goin', chief?" caused every pigeon in the vicinity to flutter heavenward in terror.

They also brought *her* out of her card and gift shoppe with the printing section in the rear that produced raised-letter business stationery, calling cards, and invitations to any function worth inviting people to.

The morning sun shone upon Martha Conway and touched her burnt umber tresses with gleaming highlights, brought out the high cheekbones and shadowed the dark eyes,

glinted from a shiny nose and caressed the full, curving lips Hogan considered the most enticing this side of the Mississippi. It also emphasized the furrow between her brows and the stony set of her jaw.

"Ha!" she said, hands thrust deep into the pockets of her robin's egg blue smock.

"Ha," said Hogan.

"I put that announcement on your desk to remind you. Are you taking me to the reunion or not?"

He shrugged. "I told you. I'm on duty."

"You're the goddamn chief! How can you be on duty?"

"That's why I am the chief," said Hogan illogically.

"You're always on duty when you don't want to take me somewhere I want to go, but you're never on duty when you feel like crawling into my bed."

Hogan couldn't argue the point.

"You know who I'll have to go with if you don't take me? Roger!"

Her voice reminded Hogan of the despairing wail of a blues sax.

"He's not so bad."

"Not so bad? *Not so bad?* He drives with one hand on the wheel and the other conducting a physical examination."

"So? He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"If I want my body examined

by him, I'll pay to have it done in his office with his nurse two feet away."

"You could stay home," suggested Hogan.

"How can I stay home? I'm head of the reunion committee, for God's sake. I have to be there. This will be the biggest one yet, you know. People will be there who have never come before. A lot of surprises. Don't you want to see your old classmates?"

"Hell, no," said Hogan feelingly.

Suspicion crept into her voice. "Everyone always said there was something wrong with you."

Hogan smiled at her. He'd grown up shy and tongue-tied in the presence of females. Not knowing what to say, or how to say it—should a thought that wouldn't get his face slapped accidentally cross his mind—he'd simply smiled. While the few smart ones read the smile for what it was, many saw only mystery and knowledge of things they didn't know and were dying to be taught, thereby conferring many interesting benefits that required no conversation at all.

This was one time the smile didn't even get off the ground.

"You're showing your age," he said. "Today the accepted expression is I created a nega-

tive response in the people around me."

"You're sure as hell creating one now. Are you taking me or not?"

"No."

"You'll be sorry, Dolph."

Her threat curled darkly around his ears as he continued down the alley.

He might at that. Not about not seeing his classmates. He'd been an outsider, thrust among them at fourteen when his father had been transferred there. Hogan the Elder didn't believe in life insurance, so when he died two years later, Hogan the Younger and his mother plunged overnight from thirty-five thousand a year into poverty. From that point on, attending school was secondary to working, and his classmates lived in what to him was fantasy land. He'd disliked a few, ignored most, and was friendly with only two. They wouldn't be there. Vince's fighter had gone down over North Vietnam, his body never recovered, while Bert headed an international corporation's Tokyo office.

No. If she stayed mad, he might lose the benefits of the most enticing lips this side of the Mississippi, which would be absolutely irresistible if clamped shut on half the words they so precisely articulated.

He wondered if that had been a minor factor in the departure of her ex-husband, the major one being that she'd refused to abandon her somewhat incapacitated father to the doubtful care of a nursing home.

Keeping the old man would have been no sacrifice. The house was more than large enough, and cost didn't enter into it. The old man had sold his little store for an excellent price to an ambitious Korean and managed to get around with his walker well enough to require only a little attention—which he fiercely resented anyway. Hogan had known him. Not as well as his son-in-law, true, but even he realized that any woman with Pop Pevinski's stubborn Polish blood coursing through her veins would have seen the world come to an end before shipping him off. Conway should have known better. Only a fool challenged parental fealty in the Pevinski household.

Her father's death had subsequently left Martha enough money to open her shop and send her teenage son to private school, and far better off in many ways than her ex, who, at last report, had been sliced from a corporate payroll by a zealous MBA fifteen years his junior.

Entering the coffee shop always gave Hogan a comfortable feeling.

Being a family enterprise, the old hotel had been remodeled frequently; otherwise it would have suffered the fate of its contemporaries and become a hookers' haven. As it was, it rated three stars in the guidebooks, which described it as "offering the ambiance of yesterday with the conveniences of today."

The coffee shop featured tablecloths, stainless steel cutlery, matching place settings bearing the hotel's monogram, and prices that could be juggled on an expense account. The waitresses wore lacy white caps, low-cut blouses, and tiny aprons over short, tight skirts, reinforcing "the ambiance of yesterday with the conveniences of today" feeling.

He sat at his usual table in the corner. As part of her continuing campaign for a rerun of the week they had spent together in the Bahamas, the smiling hostess never gave it to anyone else unless absolutely necessary.

Here and there he spotted a face that might or might not belong to one of his old classmates, several of them gazing at him with equal suspicion.

Eyes on his doughnut as he sliced it into segments, he

didn't notice the man until he slid into the chair opposite.

Twenty years had bulldozed his sandy hair a good distance back from his forehead, his round face held lines that shouldn't have been there for at least another ten, and the eyes, which had always been good-humored, were blank and hidden somewhat by the tinted lenses of his glasses.

"Hello, Dolph," he said.

Hogan extended a hand across the table. Now he knew what Enticing Lips had meant by surprises.

"Nice to see you again, Fraser. How's the world treating you?"

Teal smiled. "It did its worst a long time ago. Nothing afterward is worth complaining about. Coming to the reunion?"

Hogan shook his head, popped a piece of doughnut into his mouth, chewed, and said, "If you don't mind my saying so, I thought you'd be one person who would never come back. Had your breakfast? They make a nice omelette. If not that, how about some coffee?"

"Thank you, Dolph. I'll settle for the coffee." Teal looked around. "Probably start rumors. The class killer having coffee with the police chief."

"Fraser, if you're not ready to tell them all to go to hell, you

came back too soon."

Teal smiled at the waitress. Aware of the hostess's critical eye, the waitress smiled at Hogan and refilled his cup.

"Oh, there were a few who didn't call for me to be hanged in the town square. Always had the feeling that you were one."

Hogan shrugged.

"You never left here at all, did you, Dolph? Not even to go to college somewhere, yet you ended up as chief of police. Maybe that says something about the quality of education and the teachers twenty years ago."

Hogan doubted it. He was sure teachers hadn't changed; a few bad ones, most mediocre, and a few good ones. That business about the teachers of yesteryear being more dedicated was crap. He couldn't recall one who had ever given him more than the time of day, if that, including the so-called counselor. The only one who remained in his mind was a giggle social studies featherhead who had called him Ralph Hagen for an entire semester.

"Got my degree while I was in jail," said Teal, "but I'd have preferred a more conventional campus. Like one with girls. Waste of time, really. Didn't do me a bit of good when I got out."

Hogan didn't tell him it had taken a long time to catch up on

sleep after earning his through six years of night classes. "I don't like sad songs with my morning coffee. Maybe late at night with soft music and a beer."

Teal turned his chair slightly and crossed his legs. "You know what bothered me most, Dolph? Not being able to remember. Think about that for a minute. Did I regret doing it? Or was I a monster who enjoyed it? If you can't remember how you felt when it happened, then you haven't learned anything about yourself." He tapped his forehead. "But it's all in there, Dolph. The little gray cells see all and know all even though they refuse to let you in on it. I'm sure you know that the psychiatrists tell you the reason is because knowing the truth would be too much of a shock and maybe the whole thing should be left alone. I didn't buy leaving it alone. I kept working on it. Took me twenty years, but now I know."

He rose, pushed the chair into place, and said, "Gives a man a very peaceful feeling. Been nice talking to you, Dolph. Thanks for the coffee."

Hogan finished, left a dollar for the waitress, and headed for the cashier to be waylaid by a woman with dark brown hair who had been moussed, massaged, sunlamped, tennised,

facialed, and couturiered to within an inch of her life, none of which concealed the fact that she had a weight problem and was growing older.

"Dolph Hogan?"

Hogan looked into the eyes, the only feature that defies time and can be changed only with tinted contacts.

"Hello, Smoky," he said.

She laughed. "You never did tell me why you called me that."

He smiled. "Never will. How are the children?"

"Fine. How did you know I had children?"

"It's one of the requirements." Like driving a Mercedes. "Bring your husband with you?"

"He couldn't get away."

"He should have known better than to let you loose with your old crowd."

She laughed again. "How about you? Married?"

"Been too busy."

"I can imagine how. See you later?" She sounded hopeful.

He'd always called her Smoky because of her eyes, a dusty blue that reminded him of the mountains on a hazy day. Because her last name began with a G, she'd sat in front of him in a half dozen classes, one of a small group with wealthy parents that considered itself the elite. Their futures already

on track, they accepted election to class offices as their right and were always busy with plans far above the comprehension of the peasant class surrounding them. Her best friend had been a tall thin girl who had developed sneering at everyone, from the principal to the janitor, to a level that could only be envied by the others. By graduation, they were veterans in practices others had yet to discover and some never would. Or want to.

All of a sudden this reunion could no longer be ignored. He sensed it had more undercurrents than the Atlantic and like it or not, he'd better talk to the Enticing Lipped Chairperson.

She came down the aisle between the card racks to meet him, her smile soft. "I'm glad you stopped in, Dolph. I wanted to apologize. I know you hate dinners." She shrugged. "It's just that for a woman to go alone is as bad as going to the prom without a date."

He put an arm around her shoulders and led her toward her small office. "So even the guy everyone thought had something wrong with him is better than nothing."

"Keep it up if you want me to get mad again."

"You won't be the only one, male or female, who will be there alone, and there are others who will want to sit in groups. Creates a problem, doesn't it? How do you handle it?"

"Long tables. That way, no matter how many want to sit together, they can, and even if you end up sitting next to someone you don't know—"

"—or never liked—"

"—you can simply look in the other direction."

"In other words, people find their own seats. Even Fraser Teal."

She closed the door to the office. "The committee talked it over. We know it will be awkward, but we couldn't very well bar him, could we? I mean, if he doesn't have enough sense to know everyone will be whispering—"

"And few will want to be near him—"

"Oh, that isn't a problem. Jeez, we're not all that insensitive. The whole committee said they'd sit with him if no one else would, but I don't think that will be necessary."

"Will the Queen of Throw-away Husbands, Eileen the Widow, also be there?"

She nodded. "She registered under her last husband's name, Stuart. First time for both her and Fraser."

"What other surprises are going to turn up?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, there's Ronnie Houston and Mavis Meredith and—"

Most of the names meant nothing to him until she said, "—and Melissa Krowder, but she's not fooling anyone. She's really in town to autograph her latest novel at the bookstore tomorrow."

He'd once glanced through a paperback of one of Melissa's novels. The hero had been named Don Dollar and the heroine Princess Peseta. He'd missed his wastebasket with it.

She came close and looked up, the enticing lips parted. "You really won't change your mind?"

He tapped the silky skin of her forehead. "Think."

She smiled. "I am. Of after the dinner."

"You're drooling like one of Melissa's heroines. Think of me at the dinner."

"At the dinner," she said thoughtfully. "I know your table manners aren't the best, but—"

"Stop fooling around and concentrate."

She took his hand with both of hers, clasped it to the center of her breast, and closed her eyes. "Help me."

"Your b*ain isn't in your chest."

"Don't tell me where my brain is." Eyes still closed, she said, "I see Fraser Teal and the police chief. He's seated with a gorgeous Polish brunette wearing a dynamite gown, so stunned by her beauty that for the first time in the history of the class, he's attended—"

She opened her eyes. "That's it, isn't it? You've given yourself a legitimate excuse. If you go, it will look as though you're there to keep an eye on Fraser."

"How many of my cops will be there?"

She closed her eyes again. "O'Brien. He married Rachel Madigan. Vic Tessler. He was one of us. I guess that's it."

The softness beneath his hand was beginning to get to him.

"This is nice. Go ahead and concentrate some more."

She dropped his hand. "Like hell. Benefits accrue to those who earn them. Like some pensions. If you don't contribute, you don't receive."

He lifted her chin, kissed the most enticing lips this side of the Mississippi, and headed for the door. "I'll give some thought as to how much I want to invest."

"No choice, Hogan. Your share has to match mine."

Fifty-fifty? That was frightening. He'd always considered ten-ninety sufficient.

He walked back to the police building slowly. It had been built of dirty brown granite because the city had gotten a bargain from a quarry on the brink of bankruptcy. It would, of course, have been political heresy to pass the savings on to the taxpayers, and he'd often wondered if the grinning gargoyles sticking their noses out here and there had been modeled after the politicians who'd shared in the construction profits.

O'Brien and Tessler. Not much help there. They'd be limited to a table with their wives. What he needed at the country club tonight was two others of the right age; average looking so that they could wander around without attracting attention. Hell, not everyone knew everyone else.

His office was reputed to be nicer than the mayor's; floor to ceiling polished oak panels, indirect lighting, deep rug on the floor, magnificent oak desk. He retained it only because it was too small for His Honor.

The four men sat before him in the red leather and oak arm-chairs—O'Brien and Tessler and the two sent by the chief of detectives—Knopf and Petrie. Two more ordinary looking individuals would be hard to find.

Hogan pointed at O'Brien

and Tessler. "You two will have to stay close to your wives or you might find yourselves sleeping on the sofa, so I don't expect much more from you than to keep your eyes and ears open."

He tossed two plastic name badges across to Knopf and Petrie.

"Provided by Mrs. Conway. After the usual back patting and dinner, things will loosen up for the dancing. I want you two to drift in and circulate. Walk around with a glass of ginger ale to make it look as though you're part of the group. After reading some of the reports you've turned in, I know you're good at making up stories, so you shouldn't have any trouble. There are three people I want you to keep your eye on. Fraser Teal, Eileen Stuart, and Melissa Krowder. Don't ask me what you're looking for or what I expect you to hear. I don't know. If you're as good as your captain says you are, you'll know it when you see or hear it. Knopf, if nothing happens before then, call me here at the office when it looks like the party's breaking up."

"Excuse me, chief." Knopf jerked a thumb toward his nose. "If you want us to look authentic, this is no ginger ale face. This is a beer face."

Hogan grinned. "Okay, but

make one glass last so long it turns flat."

Knopf called at eleven thirty.

"The ones who have jobs to go to in the morning are drifting out. No one killed anybody, although I heard a lot of threats among the married folk about what will happen when they get each other home."

"What did you see?"

"Teal sat next to that writer at dinner, and their heads have been very close all evening. A lot of people found that strange. A couple told me she had a crush on him in school but he ignored her. Very plain, not his type. Anyway, she's done a first class job of getting bombed. He pretended to match her drink for drink, but I've seen too much genuine elbow bending to buy an act. It looks like that old high school scheme of getting your date swacked so you can tumble her in the rear seat later. Why, I don't know. Hell, in twenty years she went from plain to downright ugly. Think he might be after her money?"

Not with Fingers Abuhove lurking in the background, thought Hogan.

"Did Teal talk to the Stuart woman?"

"Yeah, once. Off in a corner. None of us could get close. He was all smiles, but I think the drink in her hand froze solid."

After that, she couldn't take her eyes off him and the writer. Every once in a while, he'd glance at her and smile. I guess she got tired of seeing him having such a good time because she left about five minutes ago. Petrie followed her out."

"Listen," said Hogan. "If Teal and the writer leave within the next fifteen minutes, stall them. It will take me that long to get there."

Hogan drove into the well lighted parking lot in his unmarked car to see Petrie leaning against his own not far from the entrance.

He stopped and lowered the window.

"You didn't follow her?"

"She didn't leave. She's sitting in that silver Olds toward the end of this row. What in the hell is she waiting for?"

"I'll stay and watch. You drive down the road a bit and pull over. If she goes by, tail her. That way she won't see anyone follow her out."

Hogan circled the lot and found a slot facing the clubhouse not far from the entrance, killing his lights as though waiting to pick someone up.

Petrie had just pulled away when Teal and a woman appeared at the head of the steps

leading down from the clubhouse.

The woman's hair appeared to have been caught in a hurricane. The dress was so short and tight a hooker would have rejected it as showing too much too soon. Clutching Teal, she wobbled down one step at a time. They reached the bottom and started across the lane.

An engine roared and tires screamed as the Olds suddenly pulled out and accelerated. Teal dived for safety, leaving Melissa Krowder swaying in the headlight beams.

Hogan slammed his foot down. His car leapt forward, cutting the Olds off. The Olds slammed into his right front, crunching metal and half spinning him. Jolted but held in place by his seat belt, he unfastened it and climbed out.

Knopf was charging down the steps. Teal was staring at Hogan. Melissa Krowder was looking around blankly and frowning as if ready to ask, what was the loud noise?

Hogan thrust a forefinger at Teal and roared, "Stay where you are!" before he ran around the car to the Olds.

Eileen Stuart still clutched the wheel with both hands, moaning softly. A trickle of blood from a cut on her forehead ran down her cheek to join one from the corner of her

mouth. Too bad the Olds didn't have an airbag.

At two in the morning, Melissa was in her hotel room, anesthetized by alcohol. At the hospital, something much more expensive with a very long chemical name had sent Eileen just as deeply into dreamland.

Knopf dropped Teal into the chair before Hogan's desk, his expression saying he'd prefer to deposit him in Angie's dumpster with the animal entrails, gave him one last withering look, and walked out.

Hogan's voice was very tight and controlled. "Listen, dummy. What in the hell made you think I'm so stupid I'd let you get away with it? The hotel records show you called Eileen twice. Easy to guess you were setting her up somehow by telling her you knew what happened that night. At the dinner, you probably told her you were going to get Melissa drunk and drive her to the police station, where she'd sing a twenty-year-old song, a real golden oldie. You knew damned well Princess Pea Brain would believe it, try to stop her in some way, and let her lawyers straighten it out. Hell, she thinks lawyers were created to keep her out of jail. They've been doing it all her

life. And you, you'd laugh all the way home."

"She—"

"*Shut up!* It took you twenty years to realize what happened. I knew two days after they brought you in that you hadn't been driving the Camaro. To run that car over Melrose three times, you had to be mad as hell at him. You had no reason. Eileen did. Everyone ignored it or covered it up, but it was common knowledge that Melrose was giving some female students lessons in a course that wasn't listed, and when he was tired of them, he canceled the class. Eileen didn't like being canceled. You were too drunk to drive, so she took the wheel. Professor Hot Pants happened to be crossing the lane as she pulled out, and she took the opportunity to flatten him, making sure by driving over him twice more. Then she drove close enough to home to walk, pulled you behind the wheel, tore her dress, and ran weeping to her father, knowing that she could hide behind Daddy's money. None of the witnesses was in a position to see who really was driving, which made it easy for her to put on a big act so that everyone would pin it on you. And you, you dumb schmuck, had partied so hearty you couldn't remember. Stupid bastard."

Teal half rose, his voice furious. "And you let them send me away—"

"I let no one do anything! I was nineteen. Not even on the force, but I swiped a fingerprint kit and dusted the wheel of the Camaro. Not a print on it. I didn't know much, but I did know that being drunk doesn't prevent a man from leaving fingerprints. I talked to your lawyer. The guy was no Melvin Belli, you know. He said there was nothing he could use. He couldn't prove Melrose was tusseling Eileen or any other female unless one talked. Why in the hell should they make themselves look bad to save you? They owed you nothing. As far as the steering wheel was concerned, nothing there either. Integrity of the evidence was destroyed because that car wasn't sealed the minute they pulled you out of it. Two days later, who the hell could say how or why the wheel was clean?"

"There was Melissa—"

"I didn't know about her until later. Someone told me Ms. Whacko used to dance in the moonlight on the porch outside her bedroom. Looking for inspiration, I guess. I drove out to her parents' house. Sure enough, it was across the road from where they found you. She hadn't gone to the prom, and it

was possible that if she'd been dancing naked in the moonlight that night, she'd have seen Eileen park the car, drag you behind the wheel, and run home, but she had no reason to get up on the witness stand and say that, not when she had reasons of her own to keep quiet."

Hogan rose and leaned forward, a menacing figure with both hands flat on the desktop and his voice lashing like a whip. "Now listen to me, you dumb bastard. You're not the first to get shafted and not the last, but as far as I'm concerned, you came out ahead. You think those seven years ruined you, but they're over with and gone a long time ago, so suck it up and start living again. At least you still have a chance to do something with your life. Those two are too far gone. Neither is worth a damn as a human being, which is a lot worse than being dead. You want revenge? Leave them alone. They're doing a damned good job of destroying themselves. Now get the hell out of here, and don't come back."

Hogan watched him go, sighed, and reached for the phone.

"Waken you?"

"Winding down. Too tense to sleep."

"You sound like you could use a hug."

"And a bedtime story. Like what went on in that parking lot."

"Put on the coffee. It's longer and a bit more complicated than *The Little Engine That Could.*"

A robed Martha sat across from him at the kitchen table, coffee cup held to her lips in both hands, eyes wide.

"Jeez, you never know, do you? If I'd been Melissa—"

"You can't be Melissa because your brains aren't scrambled. Which doesn't mean she's stupid. Here she was, dreaming of being a writer and seeing the daughter of a publisher—"

The lips formed a magnificent O and the eyes went wide. Not slow, Martha.

"Omigosh. I'd forgotten that. You mean she—"

"She sure did. No one ever wondered why Travant, who published textbooks and a half dozen novels a year that were read only by professors of literature, suddenly took on Melissa and her tripe. I'm sure he had no idea that she'd catch on. He published her first book because she blackmailed him into it. Then they discovered that crime did pay after all. Melissa's books were bringing in more than half the revenue and making them both rich, but

that wasn't all. One of the advantages of being police chief is that you can sit on your rear and tell someone—look into this and tell me what you find. So I know the Queen of Romance has her lawyers maneuvering to dump him, giving Eileen two reasons to want her dead. One, she wanted to shut her up about that night. Two, Melissa was trying to take over the family pot of gold. If I hadn't stopped her, she would have run over her three times the way she did with Melrose. She'd have worn out reverse and drive."

Martha propped her chin on one hand, which seemed to emphasize the most enticing lips this side of the Mississippi.

"You're a lot smarter than I thought, Hogan. Smarter than Santucci, I'm sure. All this kind of destroys that theory of his, doesn't it?"

"I don't know." He grinned. "What were you doing that night?"

"None of your damned business. I was talking about—"

"Teal? The police chief up there tells me he drinks a lot. Melissa? She started out blackmailing Travant, and her moral standards went downhill from there. Eileen—"

"Hah. Goodbye to the theory. She didn't go on killing people. One of her husbands died in an

accident, and the other had a heart attack." She rose and yawned. "Time for that hug, Hogan."

The way those lips handled *people*. Maybe thirty-seventy wouldn't be too high. He held her tightly, her head tucked under his chin. The scent of her hair and her soft breath tickling his neck made him think of spring and flower petals. Maybe he should consider forty-sixty.

"Want to hear what Santucci

said about Eileen?" he asked softly. All he got was a sleepy *Mmmmm?* and a snuggling body movement that brought fifty-fifty roaring over the horizon. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Look at Eileen's husbands. Both had contributed one hundred percent and never lived to collect.

He scooped her up and carried her toward the bedroom, hearing Santucci's voice: "I know damned well she killed them both, Dolph, but I couldn't prove it."

FICTION

Extra Cheese, and I Have Your Coupon

by Dan Crawford



ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

Business was in a lull at eight on that summer Saturday at Pizza Steve's. Not that sales at Pizza Steve's were ever something to make the Fortune 500 tremble. The joint was a closet office, a kitchen, and a garage. The garage was the cleanest part.

Pizza Steve's loyal fleet of drivers sat behind their trio of fifth-hand vans, fortifying themselves for the work ahead, if any. "What is this?" demanded Avery, around a mouthful of whatever had prompted the question.

"It's Steve's new brainstorm, Tropical Storm Pizza," said Jim. "Anchovy and pineapple, I think."

"Tropical Storm?" said Mary Pat. "Not really?"

"Believe it," said Avery. "Tastes like a week of bad weather."

Jim opened his mouth to speak or eat, but before he could do either, an obnoxious buzzer rattled the garage. "I'm up, right?" he said.

"You were here when I got here," said Avery.

Jim nodded and, taking his plate of rapidly cooling Tropical Storm, strolled toward the kitchen. About a yard from the door, he stopped at a large crack in the garage wall and dumped the plate down inside.

"Don't let Steve see you do-

ing that again," Mary Pat called. "He says it attracts bugs."

"I'm ready for him." Jim reached into his Pizza Steve windbreaker and brought out a box labeled "Lyle's No-Buggy."

"You'll need more than that for these roaches," said Avery.

"It's not for the roaches," Jim told them. "It's to carry around in my pocket and show Steve." He tucked the sealed box back into his pocket, and moved on into the kitchen.

"Whatcha got?" he asked Valencia, behind the counter.

"Two deliveries out on Leckey Avenue North," she told him, pushing two of the off-orange Pizza Steve boxes across to him.

Jim grimaced. Leckey Avenue was a crackerbox/basketball hoop development, all families and small tips unless you happened to get a man whose wife was out of town for the weekend. But he shrugged and hauled the little boxes out to his truck.

He tried the radio, just on the off chance that it was alive today. It had worked on three trips of the last forty, but there was always hope he'd bring in some station loud enough to drown out the rattling of the loose doors. So far, these doors had never fallen off while he was in motion, but there was no

reason to think they wouldn't.

The clunker was so noisy that he had been on the road for nearly five minutes before he realized there was someone else there. He caught the motion behind him to the left and almost turned to look.

But he had his instructions. Steve couldn't afford insurance, so he told all his drivers how to behave in these situations. Jim kept his eyes squarely on the road as he said, "I've only got twenty in change. It's all yours, and take as much pizza as you want."

"That's not what I want."

Something in the voice made him look, despite instructions. Something in the eyes made him say, "Wh-who are you?"

The little man blinked once. "Some call me Death."

Jim believed it; you could tell by the eyes. Certainly there was nothing in the face or that weeny little mustache. And that necktie had to be a clip-on.

But the eyes were more than human. "Death," said Jim. It took him a few seconds to think of any reason such a being would be in his pizza truck.

Jim had the same reaction anyone would on seeing the Great Eventually become the Big Fat Right Now. "Why me? Why today?"

"That's not my department." A clipboard appeared in the lit-

tle man's hands, and he raised the top sheet. "But you're on the schedule, so you have to go."

"When?" asked Jim. "How?"

The man nodded and flipped through the sheets on the board. "Says here you will be hit head-on by a large truck as you drive down Cullen Boulevard or Towner Street."

"You mean I get hit by a truck either way?" Jim demanded.

"Probably."

The exit for Cullen Boulevard, the shorter route to Leckey, was coming up, so this was a matter of some urgency. "What 'probably'? You mean there's a way out? I can live?"

"That's not the way I'd bet," said the supernatural being. "There's always an out, but it's a billion-to-one shot. And if you figure it out, six otherwise unscheduled people will have to die instead of you. Naturally, that's a lot of extra work, so it's better if you just meet your destiny and that truck."

Jim let the exit for Cullen go right by. "Come on. Can't you even give me a hint?"

"I could get called on the carpet for just coming to see you this early," the man told him. "But since the odds are so much against your surviving, I figured there was no harm."

"But . . ." He could always

turn around and just go back. His life was worth more than his job, surely. Maybe a quick U-turn was his one chance. U-turn?

"If I don't hit the truck, I'll live?" Jim demanded.

"Well, not forever," said his passenger. "Seventy-five years, tops."

"Is that all?" Jim demanded.

"All right, make it ninety," the man replied, slapping the papers back down on his clipboard. "You won't get it."

The antiquated delivery truck had reached the exit to Towner. Jim studied the traffic carefully; he wasn't sure whether the ramp counted. He started up and, since there was no one coming down the ramp at him, he wrenched the steering wheel around, praying that the doors wouldn't pick this minute to pull free.

"Oh, I say!" protested his passenger as the truck sped down Towner backwards.

"Let's see someone hit me head-on now," Jim retorted. "How about those ninety years?"

The man was scowling at his clipboard. "Now I have to take six other people instead."

"Not my worry," said Jim.

"I'd have expected you to take that attitude," snapped the man. "Good day, sir!" And he simply faded away.

Jim did not let his guard down for all that. He drove backward all the way out to Leckey, and he was careful to drive backward all the way back down Cullen on the return trip. The highway patrol was fortunately patrolling elsewhere, for all Jim's concentration was required to get the rattletrap along the roads in reverse without complete collapse. He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed the windbreaker in the back.

"If we survive this," he promised the truck, "I swear I'll take you out tomorrow and wash you."

They did survive, but when Jim went to work the next day, his truck was not to be seen.

"Hey, where's the clunker?" he asked Avery.

Avery started for the kitchen without a word. "What's with him?" Jim asked Mary Pat.

She didn't answer that. "Steve wants to see you in back," she said.

He shrugged. "So I'll turn around." Mary Pat didn't laugh.

So Jim made his way to the little office, stepping carefully so as not to slide in the grease. Through the open back door, he spotted the patrol car. Somebody must have spied him on Cullen and gotten his license number.

"They said you wanted to see

me," he told Steve, trying to ignore the two large policemen and the man in the suit. Surely driving backward down the highway didn't rate a man in a suit. Anyway, Avery and Mary Pat could testify he hadn't been drinking.

"Mr. Cloke?" said the man in the suit.

Jim sighed. "Yes, sir?"

"Mr. Cloke," the man said, reaching for something on the floor, "four people died last night, and two more are in critical condition. They show similar symptoms, but the only thing these six people have in common besides that is that

they'd all had pizza from Pizza Steve's last night, all delivered by the same truck. The truck in which we found this."

He raised a plastic bag in which had been sealed a box labeled "Lyle's No-Buggy." From where he stood, Jim could see that the top of the box was missing.

He had two thoughts simultaneously. One was that the man in the truck might have been Death and might have been some other supernatural. The other was that his deal for ninety years might not turn out to be the best bargain he'd ever made.

FICTION



KRO

Anomalies of the Heart by Ashley Curtis

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

Mapple looked at Basram. He looked at his bare black feet, his scrawny legs, his western shorts. Basram's eyes looked dirty, but at least they didn't have flies crawling around them, like most babies' eyes around here did. He reckoned that Basram was about eleven years old, though it was very difficult to tell, and Basram himself said fourteen.

Every day, Basram led Maple around the outskirts of the village, over the hard, packed dust, around the great juniper trees, past the emaciated herds of cattle and the flocks of goats tended by children, over the dry wadis where the men dug deep for water for their animals. And always Basram carried in his right hand a long, thin, rectangular box hammered together from the remnants of boards he had probably found around the hospital. The handle of what must once have been a suitcase was screwed into one side of the box, and it was this that Basram held in his right hand. It was his weapon. Not the box, but what was in the box.

No one was going to mess with Basram. It was his own idea. He needed it because his father was not Lambanu. He would never be a warrior like most of the young men around here, and he had only a mother to look after him. He went to the Mission school, and carried a snake perpetually at his side.

Basram had another box as well. It was much shorter and somewhat fatter, just big enough to hold a rat. When it was time for the snake to eat, Basram hooked the two boxes together and lifted up a sliding door between them. Except for these rare variations in its life, the snake lay stretched out inside Basram's box, carried about as if it were a collapsible fishing rod.

Maple went to the hospital every day, and always saw the same thing. He walked down the main street, the only street of Tingu, raising dust at every step. On his left and right, on the porches of the one room boxes that were their homes, their restaurants, their grocery stores, the women sat, lethargic, with small piles of tomatoes or garlic or onions at their feet. Though they were happy to sell to you, they made no effort to attract your attention, had no sales pitch, and seemed indifferent to whom you bought from. It had given Maple an uncomfortable feeling on the first day, and he had had Basram do his shopping ever since.

At the bottom end of the town he reached the gates of the Mission Hospital where a crowd of people, potential visitors, stood about but were not let in. He sometimes turned around and looked back up the street at the village. There was not much to see. Even the

little houses were mostly hidden by the dusty bushes that grew along the road. A few hundred yards up the gentle slope the road simply stopped, and somewhat higher, though in the same line, a vague, white building with a gabled roof (the only one in Tingu) brought the village definitively to an end. This was the police station, Basram had said. But Maple had yet to see a police officer, or any movement at all around the house.

The gatekeeper, a wizened old man with a stick, let Maple into the hospital grounds without questions—in deference to his whiteness, he supposed. Once inside, things looked different. There were flowerbeds, there was water and the sound of a generator pumping electricity. Maple always had an eerie feeling at this point, just inside the gate. He supposed it was what they called *déjà vu*: he had the sudden, shocking sense that he had lived through exactly the same moment before. It was not just because he had come through the hospital gate at approximately the same time, with approximately the same attitude, the day before and the day before that; it was not just a similarity but rather an exact repetition that he felt. He tried to shrug it off, for he could not find its cause and he did not think that he believed in such things anyway.

The hospital itself was on his left, a U-shaped structure, also one story but made of plastered-over cinder blocks, cleanly painted, fresh. Immaculate nurses walked about, many of them white, in pale gray habits with a crucifix about the neck. They smiled at him as he walked by.

Sometimes he did not go directly to Schmidt-Grohe's room. Sometimes he walked softly through the gardens to the back of the compound from where, over a small, inviting metal gate, he could look into the doctor's quarters. He saw a flagstone terrace with flowers everywhere, and odd bits of sculpture peeking out from various corners and niches. When he came at lunchtime he smelled garlic broiling in olive oil, roasting meat, the pale, damp smell of boiling pasta. He had several times considered asking if there were not an extra room back here, but he had never got up the courage. Nothing had been offered him, and he did not want to presume. Only, when he entered the courtyard of Mama Haja's in the evening (and he no longer did so without Basram at his side), and felt his stomach sink, and scorpions, snakes, and giant cockroaches scuttled across his mind, he was often on the verge of running back to the hospital, jumping that gate, and demanding that he be given a bed, clean, with real sheets, a shower, the security of sealed walls.

and window screens. But he did not; he walked on, Basram by his side, unlocked the padlock that held closed the plywood door, pushed it open, and stepped back, as if to let whatever creature might meanwhile have entered his abode slip out without resistance or cause for fright. Then Basram, understanding, would go in and shine the flashlight in the corners and shake out the sheets. And Maple would say thank you to the boy and bring out the matches and the gas cooker, the tank of water, the bread, the oily cheese, tomatoes, garlic—sometimes a zucchini, if one had been featured in the little piles before the women's feet (and if there was a zucchini in the pile before one woman's feet, there was, uncannily, a zucchini in every single pile). And Basram would start to cook their dinner while Maple lay down gingerly on the bed, tucked the mosquito netting in all around him, and sweated, staring at the ceiling, telling himself to rest.

Every day he would walk through the flower gardens of the hospital, sometimes pausing at the doctor's gate (while, at other times, he did not have the heart), but inevitably making his way through the open wards to Schmidt-Grohe's room, and there he would see always the same thing.

The first time he had made this trip was engraved clearly in Maple's memory. He remembered reaching the hospital gate, knocking on the glass to gain the attention of the gatekeeper.

"Do you speak English?"

The man had stared at him, a big smile on his face, the whiff of liquor on his breath, his left hand holding a small stick with a big knob at its end.

"Schmidt-Grohe?" Maple had tried.

The man had smiled the more.

Maple had turned to look into the courtyard. He saw a boy jump up from a green bench by the fence (it had been a long time since Maple had seen such a bench, like a bench in an American park) and run across the yard to one of the grated windows. The boy's small hand rapped on the glass, his arm poking through the bars. Maple saw mothers suckling babies on other benches, old men sitting with crutches at their sides, and then, to his delight, a white nurse walking briskly down a path. He gestured to the gatekeeper, who remained smiling, and then he hurried towards this woman. She had a wrinkled, kindly face, spoke broken English with a thick

Italian accent, and told him where Schmidt-Grohe could be found.

Maple thanked her. He followed her instructions, turning left at the end of the building. He saw the second wing of the hospital extending in front of him but turned left again through the open entryway and found himself in the interior courtyard. A lawn, scantily green, occupied the space in front of the main building and between the two wings, the center of the U; at the far end of the lawn a heavily vined fence put an end to the hospital grounds. Inside, roofed concrete walkways lined both the main building and the wings, and every few yards a door opened into one of the rooms. On these walkways young children played, or sat, or screamed, or lay asleep; dark black children, naked except for the shockingly clean white of a massive set of bandages on one part of their bodies: an entire leg or, more often, a whole side of the head was wrapped in plaster or white gauze. Others, without bandages, were simply misshapen—an arm so scrawny that it might belong to an insect, or a great protrusion sticking out from the forehead, so that the child looked like a creature from another planet.

Maple followed the walkway to the third door on the left. It was open, as the nurse had promised. He stepped gently inside.

The room was mostly bare. Straight ahead he saw the large window, one of its big panes open and its blind pulled most of the way down. The sharp shadows of the outside grating sent black parallel lines all the way down the blind. Beneath the window was a ratty gray and white flecked sofa on which sat Schmidt-Grohe's traveling bag and, next to it, open but face down, a black paperback book. The doctor, dressed in a white uniform, stood at the wall to Maple's right, noting something down on a clipboard, while a large bed with bars on its sides like a baby's crib stood heavily against the left-hand wall. In this bed, contorted into an unnatural but monumental position like a piece of antique sculpture representing the agonies of some great hero, of Prometheus or Hercules, Maple's friend lay motionless—though "lay" is not the word for such a twisted position, and one would better say humped or torqued or mangled. His legs were under a white sheet, curled up as they might be by a man lying on his side, but his torso then twisted in the opposite direction, his back rose up into the air, and his head, buried in the pillows, faced the wrong way, as if it hadn't learned of the position of his legs. Maple was reminded for an instant of some great sea creature surfacing and twisting in the air before submerging again into the deep water, but this thought did not

stay for long, for his attention was consumed by the great red, irregular circle that took up most of Schmidt-Grohe's back. It was a red he had never seen before—impossible to guess the texture from the color, whether a liquid scab was building on the poor man's skin or whether the skin itself was gone and one was looking at the meat that hides inside a man like sirloin in a cow. Maple could not look at it for long, for a mutinous feeling was rising up through his intestines. He turned to face the doctor.

"How is he?" Maple asked.

The doctor looked at him a moment with his ambiguous eyes. His thin white hair was combed straight back, his face and hands were tan, his eyes rich but troubling, and he exuded both a strength and an evasion. Maple remembered their first meeting—it had been just the day before—himself sitting at the Safari Lodge, a tropical fruit cocktail on the table in front of him, waiting for Schmidt-Grohe to return from making inquiries. They had been looking for a driver to take them around the park because the van that they had hired in Nairobi wouldn't start. It had been lucky, Schmidt-Grohe kept repeating, that they'd even made it to the park. It would have been no picnic to be broken down at night in the semi-arid land that stretched for hundreds of miles on either side of the miserable dirt road from Isiolo. It was after all lion country, buffalo and leopard country—not to mention the snakes and insects that gave Maple the particular creeps. But they had made it to the lodge, and the next morning the van had just refused to start; the driver had called Nairobi; they could have a replacement only on the following day; and so Schmidt-Grohe was "inquiring," as he put it, to see about a vehicle for the day. He had returned with this Dr. Agnelli, who spoke English very well, who regularly came on his day off to the Lambanu Park, and who would gladly take a couple of visitors around. He would show them, too, places where he knew the animals would be—unlike the drivers from Nairobi, who had no idea.

Then it had all happened so fast. They had stopped the van—"Lions around here, I'm so sure of it!"—and Schmidt-Grohe, the damned fool, had got out with his fancy camera, the doctor screaming, "No!"; then Schmidt-Grohe's piercing scream, the sickening sound of his body slamming against the body of the van; the doctor jumping over the seats to the back door, opening it, pulling in the body, while Maple, petrified, stared at the red juice that poured through the back of the ripped safari shirt and waited for the lion

to jump in the van and finish them all off. Then the doctor, frantic, "Start the car, goddammit, back to the lodge," and Maple, in spite of himself, sliding over to the driver's seat, somehow getting the van started and in gear, and tearing over the hot grasses back to the dirt road, following the river up towards the lodge; the lodge finally looming into sight, and Maple himself finally opening his mouth to say, "We're almost there."

"Goddammit, no!" the doctor yelled above the noises of the jolting van. "They can't do anything for him at the lodge. We go direct to Tingu hospital. Out of the park, keep going, straight out of the park, don't stop there at the gate, just go!"

And Maple, as in one of his dreams where he is the only one who can save somebody's life, and, acting mechanically but with great bravery, does so, pushed the gas pedal down even harder, tasting a fear, an excitement, a brush with reality that he had never known before, and ran right through the exit gates while the black men in green suits emerged, shouting, from their little huts—but they were soon well in the distance. "Left on the main street," the doctor shouted, and on reaching the pitted, dusty, stone-ridden disaster of a road, the doctor asked him for a little box kept in the glove compartment and as an aside muttered, "Go left, go left," while in the background, though he could not see him, Maple heard the lingering moans of his traveling companion.

Maple had driven, hard and awkwardly, left down this road on which, the day before, they had come from the right, from Isiolo and comparative civilization. He did not know where he was going, observed only that the landscape became drier, rougher, wilder, that one no longer saw even the roadside settlements or stray mud huts that they had seen on the way from Isiolo to the park. Schmidt-Grohe moaned in the back of the van, but there was an absolute limit to the speed at which one could drive along this stretch of road that might yesterday have been bombed, so many were the craters and the washouts that wracked the suspension of the van. It took well over an hour and a half, he later reckoned, before they reached the first fork and the doctor instructed him to take the right; and three minutes later they were at the bottom of the little village he now knew, and he was backing up to the gate of the Mission Hospital.

A great commotion had arisen in the crowd that was perpetually waiting at the gate. Maple stayed in his seat until Schmidt-Grohe, on a stretcher carried by two men, disappeared into the compound

with the doctor at his side. He had wanted to get out of the van, but this crowd of black people was not inviting him to mingle. Most wore dingy western clothes and broken shoes, but some—young men, tall, lean, and powerful—were got up in some tribal fashion. Their beautifully makeup faces were accentuated by a chain of golden metal that ran from ear to ear along their perfectly smooth, black cheeks, drawing a strong, fascinating line through the depression between lip and chin. They held long spears at their sides with a short sword in a sheath about the waist, tucked into the short red cloth that was their only covering. He later learned they were the warriors of the Lambanu—something Basram would never be.

He had waited in the driver's seat, fretting, hot, while people from the crowd outside came up to the windows of the van, saying things to him in a language whose sounds he did not even begin to recognize. Finally, after what seemed like hours, a black nurse in the same gray habit he would later see on the Italian sisters made her way starkly through the crowd. She stood at the window by the driver's seat and stared at Maple for a moment.

"Your friend hurt bad," she stammered at him. "He be here long time. He maybe die."

Then, peremptorily, "Get out."

Maple had not been expecting such an order. He did not like it. Nevertheless, he opened the door and stepped out of the van.

"Place to stay," the woman curtly said. She looked about her. "Boy!" she called imperiously, pointing at a shabby looking creature sitting against the fence with a strange, long wooden box at his side. "Boy!"

And Basram, for a price of several shillings (and this was to become a refrain with him: "Mister, you have a shilling for your boy? One shilling, mister, shilling, please?"), had taken him to Mama Haja's, where he was able, for what was undoubtedly an outrageous price, to rent a "house." He had not forgotten to grab his bag from the back of the van, and he thanked Schmidt-Grohe's paranoia, which never for a moment let a single one of his possessions out of sight, for the fact that he had anything with him at all. As he picked it up, he saw what the people from the crowd had been staring at in the back of the van. A white towel still hung from the back seat, and Maple, who had always been told that blood turned dark brown, even blackish, once exposed for long enough to the air, was shocked at the still bright red color of the

liquid on this towel, and reflected that his friend must have bled copiously right up to the very end of the drive.

The doctor hung the clipboard back up on the wall. He stared at Maple for a moment before answering.

"I have to change his dressing now. It is a terrible wound."

The doctor paused and let his eyes travel about the room.

"You are probably wondering why I brought him here, why we did not go to Isiolo, which we would have reached more quickly and where the road is not so bad."

He stopped and bit his lip, and in this pose looked both humble and extremely powerful. Maple blinked his eyes with an exaggerated force.

"It is because," he said, taking up his own question, "the hospital in Isiolo is not like this hospital. The doctors are not competent. The administration is messy. We would have had to wait, even in the emergency room, longer than it took us to get here. You don't understand how this can be, perhaps, for you come from America. But I tell you it is so.

"You have seen the children, playing out there on the pavement? They are my children. They are children who have walked through fires, who have played too near a river full of crocodiles, who have been partly eaten by a wild dog in the night. They come here, and I put them back together as best I can. I have been here thirty years, you know. I have experiences with fixing people after they have played with animals.

"I would do better if I had better equipment," he went on. "Not with these, the animal cases, but the others. There are among the children here, you see, many anomalies of the heart. It is essential . . . but that's not the point."

He let out a sigh and then continued, looking down at the ground.

"I am afraid, though, that it would not have made any difference for your friend." He gestured over at the bed. "It is severe. He will not live. Save for a miracle, he will not live."

Maple had drifted over to the sofa, where he now sat down. He felt an undeniable relief at the doctor's words. He glanced down at the book beside him: *Mord in Mesopotamien*. He looked down at his feet. "I have to explain," he said. "This man is not really my friend. I hardly know him. We met only two days ago and decided to go on safari together, but only to save money. I really don't know him at all."

The doctor said nothing. He glanced over at the bed and the motionless, twisted creature on it.

"There's really no reason for me to stay here, I suppose," Maple ventured.

The doctor moved over to the bed. He readjusted something that Maple could not see.

"It would be good," the doctor said slowly, "if you would stay until . . . until he seems to be improving, or, more likely, until he has really died."

The doctor turned away from the bed now and focused his full attention on Maple. His voice modulated softly as he spoke.

"I say this out of humanitarian grounds. Your friend is probably going to die—in a strange country, of strange wounds. He has a family—I do not know what—but he must have a family, a mother or a sister or a child. I have seen enough to know that such a case is very difficult for them. Everything is so uncertain. They are informed by their embassy; there is a document from the Interior Ministry; there is perhaps a letter signed by myself. But they know nothing—who I am, what kind of government reigns here. It is too strange. They suspect foul play, or they suspect that he is really still alive, a hostage of some tribe or of a terrorist or brainwashed by the Hare Krishnas—it is all so vague. Perhaps one of them comes down here, visits the ambassador, rents a vehicle and comes to Tingu to see me. I tell them what I know—and still it is too vague, too strange, too foreign. They don't know who I am—the town of Tingu horrifies them with its primitive, slow life—they leave less certain even than when they arrived."

Maple was still staring at his feet. He knew how this would end, and knew, too, that he would acquiesce, and not out of strength but out of weakness, out of an inability to say no to a more authoritative man.

"But if a person, a western person—" the doctor's voice shifted strangely, becoming vaguely aggressive—"having nothing to do with this country, with black people, poverty, a person whose motives they can understand, someone who goes on holiday for a safari—" a bit of sarcasm, almost of anger, became more and more clear in the doctor's voice, while his eyes seemed to grow duller, to lose their power, to withdraw—"if they can meet someone like this," he said sharply, "someone who knows what happened, someone who shares, to some extent, their horror of this strange, foreign world, shares their life of comforts, running water, flushing toilets,

antiseptic, central heating—" The doctor paused at this bitter crescendo, which almost frightened Maple. Then he changed, all of a sudden, back to his earlier, gentle, kindly mode. His face relaxed, his eyes sparkled again, and his voice became peaceful, knowledgeable, understanding: "If they only meet you, and you can tell them what you saw, and how it happened—then they have a clean death on their hands. They mourn, they grieve, and they forget. They can perform the rites of grief correctly—and then they can move on. Do you see what I mean?"

Maple nodded reluctantly. A practical thought had just struck him for the first time. How did one get out of Tingu? He had not yet seen a bus—he doubted that there was a bus. Certainly no taxi. He was not sure that he wanted to try to hitch a ride with one of the two or three vehicles that entered and left the town each day. And then, as though he had read his thoughts, the doctor went on:

"Of course, I cannot compel you to stay against your will." And he addressed an ironic smile to Maple that disturbed him with its strange look of complicity, as though the two of them were in on something Maple did not quite understand. "Nevertheless, I must tell you that it is sometimes easier to come to Tingu than to leave. There is a bus that leaves every third day—you will see it tomorrow on the street if it has not broken down somewhere. But it is so packed always that it is difficult to get on, particularly for a white man. Besides, it is not safe, riding on such an overloaded bus, and there are many accidents. Sometimes a truck comes, making a delivery, and if you pay them money you can get a ride back out—but this is chancy and, besides, illegal, and they are often caught at the roadblock just outside of Isiolo.

"The easiest way out, of course, is with the hospital van. But I can't simply offer you a ride, for it is constantly in use—it is our ambulance, our supply truck, our portable pharmacy. But Gerard is making a supply trip to Nairobi in about a week, and he could easily take you along. And by then we should know about your friend."

Maple thought of the cockroach, if it had really been a cockroach, if something of that size could be a cockroach at all, that he had surprised with the flashlight in the middle of the night when he had wanted to go out to the latrine. He had not gone; he had waited until the morning, wrapped up tight in the mosquito netting, his bladder almost bursting, wide awake. He grimaced but nodded his head.

"Yes, I understand," he said.

"It is very kind of you," the doctor replied.

One morning, for a few extra shillings, Basram led Maple along a largely overgrown path into the hills outside the village. It followed a dry streambed out of which, from time to time, emerged a buried metal pipe. They left the village much farther behind than they had on any of the previous days. Maple learned that this pipeline had been a Peace Corps project seen through by a volunteer named Peter, who had lived for two years in the little cubicle in which he himself had spent the past four nights. Before this project, there had been no source of water in the village, and the people had had to seek it at the bottom of the deep holes that they dug in the dry wadis. Maple could hardly imagine living in such conditions; he didn't see how he could have survived without the pump in the middle of the village from which drinkable water was so easily obtained. He felt a pride in the work of the Peace Corps, and when they reached their destination, the "dam" that Peter had built sent a rush of warm feeling up his spine which spread out, tickling his scalp. He almost started to feel tears in his eyes as he looked at the humble engineering project, and in the same glance caught the unselfconscious, angelic face of Basram, gazing into the water where tiny tadpoles swam. It was simply a concrete wall, no more than four feet tall and seven wide, and the amount of water it dammed up was no more than might fit into a very large bathtub; yet it was enough to provide for all of Tingu.

He felt more optimistic when they reached the village after this excursion. He was almost certain that Schmidt-Grohe would be dead soon, and had the feeling that Gerard's trip was only being held up by this event. He also felt more confident himself somehow, and though he could not place exactly why, it had perhaps something to do with the discovery that this Peter had lived in his own room for two years, with the fact that it had been a white man who had laid these pipes that gave him water, with the fact that, on the walk today, his usual fears had been distant. Perhaps he was just getting used to it, this life. Or perhaps he was so desperate that he did not notice enough any more.

This last thought grabbed him as they entered the courtyard of Mama Haja's. Was it, perhaps, not that he was braver or more confident but only tired and getting foolhardy? The thought upset

him. The picture that he was expecting to see again this afternoon, of Schmidt-Grohe contorted on that metal, railed-in bed, a bed that almost resembled a medieval instrument of torture, depressed him more, and he became less sure that Schmidt-Grohe would ever die. He tried to shake these thoughts and go back to the ones that had sustained him on the walk back through the land of reddish dirt with its occasional tall trees, with the beautiful, indolent picture of the herds of particolored goats and the young, perfectly black children watching over them from the shade of trees, holding long, smoothly whittled sticks in their small hands.

"Where is Peter now?" he asked. "Do you know?"

Basram looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Peter, from the Peace Corps. Where did he go when he left Tingu?"

"I don't know," Basram finally answered. "Mister wants cheese?"

"Yes, cheese. With tomatoes, Basram. You don't know where Peter went? To America?"

Basram did not reply. They ate hard, dry tomatoes and oily, mealy cheese in silence. Maple had again the feeling, suddenly, that this would be the day, that he would enter the hospital room and the bed would be empty, the bag gone from the sofa—or perhaps another man would lie, bandaged after his own fashion, in the bed—and this would be his ticket to go home.

"Heaven," Basram finally said, out of the blue.

"What?"

"Peter went to heaven," Basram said. "Mister wants tea?"

The glimmerings of confidence that Maple had felt that morning were thoroughly gone by the time he approached the hospital gate in the afternoon. Something seemed awry. He had got out of Basram that Peter had died just before he was to leave the town, but Basram hadn't wanted to talk about it any more. He felt a new uneasiness, occasioned not only by this news about the man he was coming to see as his predecessor but also, as he approached the gate, because of the strange feeling of *déjà vu* that he received without fail whenever he entered the grounds of the hospital. It was more than a feeling of repetition—he had utterly convinced himself of this—of performing the same actions day after day, of seeing the same thing once he reached Schmidt-Grohe's room; something more specific, more eerie always struck him, and always just as he entered the hospital

grounds—and he felt that it was something he could localize if he only concentrated hard enough. He passed the gatekeeper and smelt the sticky scent of alcohol—some terrible liqueur, cherry or peach or something of the sort—and wondered if it was not this unique, ugly smell that triggered it—and then, as he slipped through the gate, he saw something that knocked the wind out of his gut. The same women, or women like them, were sitting on the benches nursing babies; and men with crutches hobbled about in brief circles before sitting down again; and a small boy got up and ran across the yard, knocking through the metal grating on the glass of a big windowpane. Maple felt suddenly sick, nauseated; he stumbled over to an empty bench. He tried to collect himself. The same boy, running over to the same window. He stared down at his feet and felt the sweat breaking out on his neck. He breathed in deeply. The outlines of his shoes were fuzzy against the ground.

He knew he had to look up at the hospital building, knew he had to place which window the boy had run up to and knocked on. He knew also which window it was bound to be. He looked up quickly, just long enough to see that he was right.

He looked down again at the ground, to calm his stomach. A few paltry blades of grass poked through the dust between his shoes. He felt a tingling on the balls of his feet, as he often did when he looked down from a tall building.

But how? What could they be doing in the room, to get it ready for his visits, whenever the little boy tapped on the glass? He stared down at his shoes but only saw the boy.

Then the body echoed in his sight. It had been too unnaturally twisted, and each time too much the same. He should have known something was wrong—known, also, from the strange way the doctor sometimes spoke. And it became clear to him, suddenly, that Schmidt-Grohe was dead; had been dead, probably, for days—perhaps, even, he had been dead upon arriving at the hospital. His wish of the last several days had just come true—but now he did not want it any more. Why were they concealing it from him? He did not even know how they had kept it from him—was that Schmidt-Grohe's corpse there on the bed? If so, why didn't it stink by now? Or was it the body of another man, contorted, the face hidden, so that he would not notice it? Had he ever noticed that it breathed?

He sat bolt upright, staring at the window. The boy had left it and gone back to sitting near a flowerbed. Should he confront the

boy? It was a stupid idea: he couldn't speak his language, and he would only give himself away. And this brought home to him that he should not do anything to show he had found out; he would have to make his visit, ask his usual questions, and go home. But what could possibly be going on? Why did they—who? The doctor? Was it Peter in that bed? This thought, which seized him suddenly, gave him the worst fright of all though it didn't make a bit of sense. He brushed it away. Why would the doctor want to keep him here? And he remembered then the first words the doctor had addressed to him. They had been an excuse. "You're probably wondering," he had said, "why we didn't drive to the hospital in Isiolo." Maple had not been wondering this at all. But clearly it was on the doctor's mind. Could it not be that, with Schmidt-Grohe already dead, it had become clear to the doctor that he had made the wrong choice in bringing him to Tingu? And was the doctor afraid of this getting out, and his being disbarred, or whatever happened to doctors when they had made severe mistakes? It was a slender thread. And Maple remembered then the rest of the conversation during that first visit, and how the doctor had been so anxious that he not leave Tingu, and had perhaps greatly exaggerated the difficulties of leaving, in order to keep him there. But why? What could the doctor want to do with him? And Maple turned his face away from the window and looked back over towards the gate, for there could only be one answer to that question.

He knew that he should, but he simply could not go into the room right now. It was too much for him; he would give himself away. It was not unbelievable that he might come into the hospital grounds without visiting: he had often, after all, walked around a long time before going to Schmidt-Grohe's room, and he might not have the stomach for it now. He stood up and glanced back at the doctor's quarters resting in their quiet, western peace, and was glad that he had never had the courage to inquire about a room.

Maple strode out the gate and up the street of Tingu, trying to think. But his senses were so assailed by unwanted noises, by the shrill screech of a bird coming at irregular intervals, the chirping of some kind of cricket, by the heat that beat down on him and the sweat it unloosed on his forehead, by the pounding of his heart, which seemed to have taken up a new position right between his ears—not to mention the regular approach of boys, boys of Basram's age and younger, with their soft refrain of "Shilling, mister? Shilling for a boy?" He saw at the end of the street in front of him

the mysterious building, half hidden in vegetation, that was the police headquarters, and his instincts quickly told him it would be exactly the wrong place to go. He reached the square where Peter's pipeline delivered water to a standing section of pipe. The people grasped a lever, plunged it down, and out came the cool, clear stream. There was a crowd around the tap. Maple sat down on a stump in the shade of a tall tree, out of sight of almost everyone.

He sat for a long time on the little stump. When he finally got up, he made his way into the pale blue building Basram had once disappeared into when Maple had asked him for a beer.

Night fell. Basram cooked a stew over the stove at dusk, and they shared the meal silently. When it was thoroughly dark, Maple sent Basram into the hut to get him his dark sweater and told him that he would be going for a walk.

"Mister, you want Basram should come? A shilling?" the boy asked.

"It's okay, Basram. I'll be fine."

"And Basram," he said on a whim, "you don't have to wait for me tonight. Go see your mother. Sleep at home tonight, I'll be okay. Here, take these shillings to her." He handed Basram several bills and watched his eyes open enormously wide. "These are for your mother, not for you. I have more for you, later. Take these to your mother, okay?"

Basram took them, nodding, dumbstruck, and was gone.

There was no one on the street. Occasionally he saw, from the tiny, thin windows at the very tops of the little boxlike houses, the faint glow of yellowish light from a kerosene lantern or a candle and heard loud chatter coming from inside. As he neared the hospital, the hum of the generator became louder until it even overcame the sharp sound of the crickets rubbing their legs together in the tall grasses all around. Soon a rectangle of brighter yellow light came into view, and as Maple got nearer to the gate, he made out the dark shape of the gatekeeper behind his window, elbows on the table, his chin resting on his hands. Maple approached the window, but the man did not see him. He was asleep.

Maple tapped lightly on the glass. The man's head jerked back, and he had to adjust his eyes for a minute before he could see who was there. He broke into a smile, and though his teeth were yellow, and even partly black, they stood out sharply against the darkness

of his skin. He smiled and nodded at Maple, but then shook his finger at him as a means of saying no. He twisted his wrist, and pointed at the watch he wore. The watch, Maple noticed, said four o'clock, and the second hand was not moving, but the message was still clear.

Maple reached into his pocket and pulled out a little pink glass bottle. He held it up to the window so the man could see. They had had only one kind of liqueur at the little store, a sickly smelling mango flavored liquid, and Maple had been sure he recognized it from the gatekeeper's breath.

The man's smile, if possible, grew even bigger. But still he did not move to open the gate. He slowly shook his head, and once again held up his broken watch against the windowpane.

Maple reached again into his pocket. He took out a twenty shilling note, and held it up next to the bottle. The man's eyes widened; he put his finger to his lips, edged out of his booth, and quietly released the latch of the gate. Maple slipped through and handed him the money and the bottle. The man smiled, nodded his head, and bowed his emaciated body. Then he returned to his little cell.

There was only one room lit up on this side of the hospital. It was one of the windows at the far end, and Maple knew that it was Schmidt-Grohe's. He crept up to it from the side and leaned his back against the wall right next to it.

He was astonished, as he stood still and collected himself, to hear breathing, loud, as though it were almost in his ear. It was a slightly asthmatic breathing, interrupted often by the beginning of a cough, or by the loud sniffling of a congested nose. He saw that the windowpane right next to him was open. He moved his head back slowly until he could look in sideways and saw something so unexpected that for a moment he was not sure if he had screamed.

Schmidt-Grohe sat on the sofa, his head right next to, almost leaning up against, the bottom of the open pane. Maple was so close to him that he could see the individual hairs on his head, wetly combed across his scalp, and even the flecks of dandruff dispersed randomly about it. Schmidt-Grohe was entirely alive—in fact, entirely healthy—just as he had been a week before when Maple had first met him in Nairobi. Maple exhaled carefully. It was so inconceivable, so ludicrous—so beyond his grasp—that he hardly even felt that he existed any more. Logic was by the boards. He made no judgment, only stood and listened to Schmidt-Grohe's wheezing breath. Then, slowly, he began to inch his head towards

the window, with a mind to looking directly into the rest of the room. He placed his face right on the wall, and slid it slowly, excruciatingly slowly, evenly, towards the window's edge—and then suddenly he froze. He heard a voice.

"Like Jesus Christ!" the voice said, and though it was the doctor's voice, it was so different from the way he had ever heard the doctor speak that he was not quite sure.

"Like Jesus Christ!" the doctor exploded, ranting, almost shouting. "Like Jesus Christ our Savior, who died so we should live, and in whom truth and glory . . ." He deflated. He ran out of steam, and his mad voice became quite normal once again, frighteningly normal, almost casual, as he rounded off his theme: "He will die so that the children live. Herr Schmidt will have his tropical island, and Dr. Agnelli will have his echocardiogram. Echocardiogram," he repeated, as if in a trance. "Echocardiogram in Tingu. Yes."

Schmidt-Grohe's head jerked forward. He muttered a series of guttural German words that must have been indecent. Then he said in English, almost whining, groveling, "I can't do it. I will not do it."

"You don't have to do anything," the doctor spit at him.

"I won't let *you* do it either, dammit," Schmidt-Grohe replied, with more force in his voice. "I come to this stinking country, live like a damned savage, grovel around in cheap hotels until I find the correct idiot—but this is for a witness, dammit! *Augenzeuge!* Not a . . . not a . . ."

"Victim," said the doctor calmly. "You are right. But now things have changed. And why have they changed?" And the doctor left his calm behind as if it were a little parcel that one might forget beside one on a bench, and suddenly was yelling once again, in a voice that twisted on itself with hate: "Because the white man is the king! Because even the black man acts that way! And when a white man dies, a rich, spoiled, pampered idiot who drinks his cocktails at the lodge and drives around in cars to take his idiotic photographs of animals and says he goes on a 'safari'—they need to see the body of this idiot. But when a black man dies, a warrior, a man who lives on God's good earth like God made him to live—in thirty years, thirty years, they have never asked to see the body of this man. Even here, even here."

"I am sorry," he said. "It is my mistake. I should have foreseen it, even here. But it is *my* mistake, and I will put an end to it."

"I will have this machine," he stated, with the deep, active accent

of finality. "I will have this machine. You can have your island or not—I will have this machine. My children—my children will have this machine."

Maple leaned his back against the wall and stared across the yard. Beyond the square of light cast through the window everything was dark. He faintly made out darker blacks against the lighter blacks, bushes, flowerbeds, the benches, the sharp horizon of the fence—and above it all the perfectly clear sky, full of stars he had never seen in the Northern Hemisphere, stars shining, also, with an intensity that he had never known. He exhaled softly and was surprised at the calm and swiftness with which he took in and evaluated what was happening. It was some kind of insurance scam, he thought, the old story of pretend you're dead and have your wife collect, and he was to have been the witness to the death—only something had gone wrong. Somebody—probably the mythical police—needed to see the body, and so now Maple was to take on a new role.

Dr. Agnelli, it was clear, had gone crazy. Maple's uneasiness with him had not been simply paranoia. He had cracked under his thirty years of dealing with almost unmentionable suffering, and, perhaps in no small part, from dealing with it from the comfort of his quarters, his statuary, his pasta and his olive oil. And Maple could even see some of the logic to the cracking: after the last few days with Basram, watching the children with their goats, watching the lithe strides of the warriors, the golden chains against their deep black chins, the redness of the earth, the bareness of it all, Maple felt, too, that if he had to choose now between saving Basram's life or saving that of one of the young boys who rode their racing bicycles around his neighborhood at home, something would drive him to save Basram first. He exhaled gently. He was getting much too philosophical. He would have to leave, and quickly. He would have to make a plan. He regretted sending Basram off tonight.

The doctor's voice, once again gentle, kindly, reached out to him again.

"It has already happened once," he said.

"What?" Schmidt-Grohe was subdued, resentful, but his fight was gone.

"There was a white man living in the house where Maple is sleeping now. He did a lot of good work for the town. He was a

good man." The doctor paused. "And then he wanted to go away. He was going to go to acting school, to become an actor." He spoke with a sadness, with resignation. "I tried to convince him to stay. And he did think about it. But in the end he decided to become an actor. He dreamed of living in New York."

It seemed as if the doctor were reaching deep into his memory for something hard to say. He was silent for a long time.

"And then, the night before he was to leave, a snake slipped in through the window of his little house—the same house Maple is in now. And the next morning he was dead."

Schmidt-Grohe did not say anything.

"I'll get a boy," the doctor said. "Wait for a minute, and I'll get a boy."

The door opened and the doctor's footsteps started up and then faded away again. Maple dared to move his face into the light. He saw Schmidt-Grohe sitting motionless on the couch. The paperback book lay on the floor in front of him. Maple heard, and then saw, the doctor return. The doctor stood by the door anxiously.

"A boy is coming," he said. "I have sent."

Schmidt-Grohe did not reply.

A minute later Basram came into the room.

Basram did not leave by the front gate. He jumped over the little fence that cordoned off the doctor's quarters and then made his way through a hole in the wall that surrounded the compound. Maple did not have time to think. Everything was turned so upside down that he barely even felt betrayed. He only knew that he wanted to go after Basram, that he needed to keep him in his sight.

He followed at a distance, over the gate and through the wall. He knew where Basram would be going. Keeping to the bushes on the right, he followed as Basram skirted the fences and small hedges that bordered the little back yards of the houses that abutted the main street. Halfway up the town, Basram turned into a path that led through undergrowth and over a tiny, dried up stream. Maple did not follow. He would be able to see enough from where he was.

Basram soon came to a wall. He clambered up its loose stones, and now stood right next to the back of the blue cubicle in which first Peter and then Maple had spent their countless sleepless nights.

Maple watched, spellbound, as Basram steadied himself, holding the corrugated metal roof of the house in his left hand. A little window no more than a few inches high with bars across it cut into the wall just underneath the roof. Basram worked delicately, carefully. He leaned the front end of his funny box on the sill of the window, then lined it up with one of the square holes in the grating. He stepped back, holding the other end of the box in his right hand. He looked about him for a moment and then, once again intent on the mission before him, fiddled with his fingers on the front of the box and finally lifted his left hand away, holding the little square of wood that was the sliding door. He stood back, holding the box at its far end with both hands, peering forward uncertainly from time to time to monitor the progress of the snake.

There was for Maple, whose normal ideas and fears had been on hold ever since he had seen Schmidt-Grohe's resurrection on the couch, something heartrendingly beautiful about what he was watching, about where he stood as he watched Basram's silhouette move in the faint light of the stars. Behind him breathed the semi-arid land, the red dirt stretching away forever with its brown, waving grasses and the astounding, sudden greens of its big trees; it was laden with its vastness, with the humility of the mud huts that the humans built and called their homes, with the grandeur of the cats and buffalo who ruled this wasteland in the night. Above him the sky hung down its unknown constellations and the Milky Way shone so brightly that it seemed a ribbon and not just a cloud, vaster than he had ever seen it, mirroring the vastness of the land beneath. In front of him, as in a pantomime, he saw the play of his own death enacted for him, blackness on blackness under the black sky, and he reflected that few people could boast of having watched, as untouched spectators, their own murder being carried out. For that was what was happening: Basram was pulling the trigger, administering the poison, turning on the switch of the electric chair. Basram was killing him, and he was watching it, the only spectator, standing in the middle of an amphitheater without bounds.

Maple began to walk away. Then a sudden rush of anger overwhelmed him. His face grew hot, he felt the muscles in his arms tense up. Tears—which seemed to be pushing upward the entire length of his body, streaming cumulatively to his head from all his arteries and veins, rushing up out of his heart—put an unbearable pressure on his eyes, a pressure that did not let up even when it

all poured out upon his face, flooding his skin with liquid heat. He was going to have to go back to the boy, grab him by the neck, smack him, kick him, rub his face down in the dirt and show him how a person acted to another person, show him, prove to him that friendship had a meaning, that there was such a thing as human feeling . . .

His eyes cleared, and his mind. Basram would be finished soon. Maple walked away, and quickly. He had no more choice.

He followed the road out of Tingu, and at the fork he took the left. It could not be more than fifty miles. He tried not to think about the length.

The animals were out at night, he knew. Once he made it through the night, he would probably be okay. The animals detected fear. He walked straight down the center of the road. He tried to avoid kicking stones.

The night was silent. He heard nothing rushing through the undergrowth. He heard no roars. He did not hear the scream of death. He felt the animals about him, animals on every side, but he did not hear a sound. His sneakers scuffed along the road. The road was empty. He walked straight ahead. The stars were changing in the sky.

He walked in a trance, straight through the night. Time had stopped moving. There was only the regular, light, easy scuffing of his sneakers on the road. There was not even any breeze. There were only his steps, strong, confident, and muscular. He was going away.

The stars changed, finally, so much that they all disappeared. There was a freshness and almost a moisture to the early dawn. Maple felt hopeful. The greatest danger is over now, he told himself. Though his belly hurt with emptiness and his knees and hips were aching terribly, he knew somehow that he would make it through the day.

He walked on through the daytime, jumping out of the way and hiding in the bushes when he heard a vehicle. The vehicle passed, and he emerged to walk again. His tongue was stuck, not just to the roof of his mouth but everywhere, to all the skin inside his cheeks. He forced himself to swallow, and seemed to squeeze down little balls of cotton cased in sticky mucus. He did not feel his legs moving but only felt a burning pain located vaguely down below his hips. It was not more than fifty miles. He was sure it was not

more than fifty miles. He had driven it himself. He had driven, yes, he, he had driven, driven Schmidt-Grohe, driven the doctor, he had driven them to Tingu. He had heard the moans. He had seen the blood. He had turned the key. . . . He tried to concentrate on his steps, the one and then the other, and then the next, down the center of the road. He could not keep them, now, for more than three in a row. He could not count to more than three.

He stopped being there. He was not there any more. He would wake up, suddenly—his head would jerk against his chest and he would see his feet, stepping, first the one, then the other, then the next—and then he would not be there any more, and he only knew that he had not been there when his head jerked down again against his chest, and he saw his feet, and was surprised; and because he was surprised he knew that he had not been watching his feet, that he had not been there, because he was surprised to see his steps. And then he looked at his steps curiously, looked down at his shoes, looked at the texture of the laces—and the texture of the laces rubbed against his eyes, and the cold, shiny eyelets, the round metal doughnuts, like machines; the canvas with its crisscross pattern, and the crisscross became magnified, and he saw the huge crisscrossing of the threads, and the sharp diamonds on the rubber, the little diamonds patterning the rubber at his toe, and the thin stripes of blue, and the places where the blue had been scuffed off: and suddenly it was a shoe again, taking a step, on the red dirt, against the stones, one step, another step. And then he was surprised, and saw his foot taking a step, and then another step, against the road, against the stones . . .

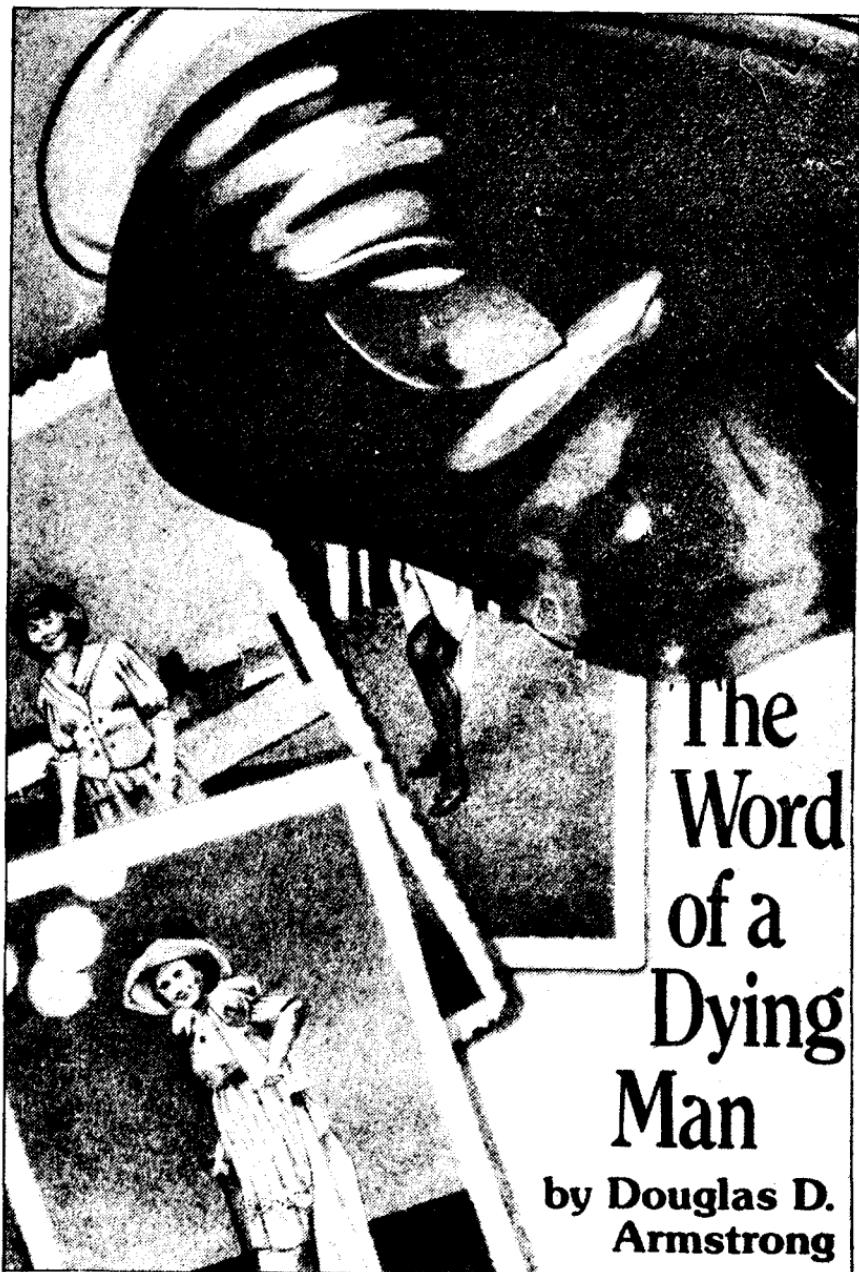
It was a white man, actually, who found him, a white man driving a white van. The van was almost new, and so the white man drove it carefully and concentrated hard upon the road ahead. At first he thought it was a large stone, and then a dead animal, some kind of antelope, and it was only after he was very near that he saw it was a human being, and a white one at that. Killed by Shiftas, the man thought, or by an animal—but what the hell was he doing here, in the middle of the road? At least thirty miles from the game park, which was the only thing of interest for a white man in these parts. And then, when he bent down, he saw that Maple was not dead. He was breathing faintly, and his pulse was very slow, but he was certainly alive.

The man stood by Maple's side for a moment. He reached up with his right hand and scratched the back of his ear. He did not

know if he should get involved. He would be in for a lot of paperwork and wasted time if this man were to die in the back of his van. On the other hand, the man had no obvious wounds on him and might just be exhausted or stricken by the heat. In that case he could possibly get a reward for having saved his life. He looked like an American, and that probably meant money. And after all, it was not far to Tingu Hospital, where he was going anyway—he had business to arrange with the doctor there. He was to get the doctor an echocardiogram, and he thought that he could do it for a very reasonable price.

He decided to risk it after all. He swung the van around and, after opening the big back door, grabbed Maple underneath the shoulders and managed to pull him in. He closed the back door, slipped into the driver's seat, and told himself (and it was not the first time, either, that he had told himself this very thing) that although his business was not always clean, he had a conscience of a sort and did good in his own peculiar way.

FICTION



The Word of a Dying Man

by Douglas D.
Armstrong

Illustration by Charles Demorat

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

Fresh coffee restored Plankett's flagging spirits. One generous swallow and he no longer felt that Lieutenant Dunbar's shrewd brown eyes were sizing him up as a potential suspect in the strange fellow's murder. Still, the cop didn't seem inclined to let him go back to the hotel, either.

"What did he say to you?" Dunbar wanted to know.

"Which time?"

"When he was lying there on the pavement."

Bleeding to death, Dunbar might have said. Or whatever it was happened to the guy's body when the knife slipped between the ribs and pierced his heart. Plankett had watched helplessly as the bloodstain spread across the man's white double-breasted suit and the assailant in the Mardis Gras mask stepped back into shadows and disappeared. Only it wasn't Mardis Gras. And the dying man seemed confused by that, too.

"Like he was trying to sort out the date, but he had it wrong," Plankett replied. "Look, I hardly knew the guy."

Which was true, even if it sounded odd.

"You met him on the tour bus your first night here, on the way to dinner in the French Quarter," Lieutenant Dunbar said, sounding skeptical again.

"Right," Plankett agreed. "The seat next to him was vacant. I felt I had to say something if I sat there next to him. We're not naturally rude in Alpena. We come to the big cities like this to learn that."

Too much edge there, Plankett thought. He reached for his coffee. Swallowed. Better.

"I was surprised he was interested in striking up a conversation," Plankett continued. "He seemed too sophisticated, too, uh, refined to be making small talk with a burly gas station operator from Alpena, Michigan. I guess he traveled a lot, though, and he had some particular affection for northern Michigan. I was surprised how much he knew about Alpena."

"Your convention," Dunbar began, floating the words like a balloon for Plankett to catch.

"The Retail Dealers Association of America."

"It brings together some rather, uh, diverse interests."

"Right. You meet small retailers of every stripe, from your personal computer whiz to your baseball card freak. What's his name, this Killian, Killigan . . ."

"Killoran," Dunbar said.

"Right, he was an antiques dealer. Baltimore, he said. Dressed the part, too, I thought. White bucks, flashy tropical suit. A stinkin' pipe. He bought that Panama hat in a shop on Jackson Square when I was with him. Strode in there, put it on, and then paid less than retail for it. Walked the sidewalks like he owned New Orleans. I had trouble keeping up. Knew something about the place, you could tell. It's why I went with him. I'd never been here before, and he seemed to want the company."

"Why?"

"How should I know?"

Honestly, what did it matter? It was just another senseless street murder committed by some cokehead desperate for quick cash. Grab the expensive camera from the one that looks like bwana and run. Only he didn't take my wallet, Plankett thought, and he could have grabbed the camera without actually using the knife. And there was the matter of the mask.

And Killoran—was that his name?—lying there, dying, trying to convince Plankett it was a different month than it was. It was June, dammit, June. Sweltering hot and muggy in New Orleans, even at one o'clock in the morning. Mardis Gras was in February, and Killoran was way off, the other direction.

"Tell me about the dinner," Dunbar said.

"That first night?"

"Was there another?"

"Yeah, we did have dinner tonight in the hotel bar, before going out." And there was lunch the day before at that gumbo place, too, but Plankett thought he'd leave that part out. Really, he hardly knew Killoran. No point making it sound like they were fast and famous friends.

"No, the first night. Where did your convention group go?"

"It was some very nice place in the south end of the quarter. We didn't really need the bus to get there. It would have been a short walk." And if it hadn't been for his taking the damn bus, Plankett thought, he wouldn't be an eyewitness to a murder right now.

"The name of the place?"

"Uh, Brubaker's or, uh . . . Look, I'm terrible with names. You must be able to find that out from the convention people." But then Plankett remembered the matchbook in his sport coat pocket. "Wait," he said, fumbling for it. "Here it is. Brennans."

"Famous place," Dunbar said dryly.

"Reputation well deserved. Great food. We had some flaming

banana dessert that was like ambrosia. I remember this guy who arrived late, it was all he ate. Killoran chided him. And the guy didn't find it funny. He didn't find anything funny. When he took off his sunglasses, he had the hardest eyes I'd ever seen."

"Why did Killoran speak to him?"

"Oh, they knew each other. I'm not sure how. I think they were trying to transact some business. I couldn't hear much of their conversation with the jazz trio playing right next to our table. And I felt funny eavesdropping on the private affairs of a man I had just met."

"Can you describe this other man?"

Plankett had been in this situation before with police, describing gas station stickup men to the uniformed squads in Alpena. And he knew about his useless tendency to average everything out in his head to five ten, one hundred sixty pounds, brown hair, no distinguishing features. Your eyes tend to miss the details of a man's appearance when they fix on a dark, lethal cylinder pointed directly between them. But this was different, less pressured.

"He was, uh, disfigured," Plankett said.

"In what way?"

"His face looked like a bunch of scar tissue, like he'd been burned as a child or had some crude plastic surgery to have something really ugly removed. Maybe that's why his eyes were so eerie. His skin didn't have any, uh, any elastic . . ."

"Did you get a name?" Dunbar asked.

"We weren't introduced." Not that it would have made much difference five minutes later, unless the guy's name had happened to be Bela Lugosi, Plankett thought. But then he did remember something potentially useful. "He wasn't wearing a convention badge."

Dunbar seemed to appreciate the detail.

"Look, are we about done?"

"No, Mr. Plankett, we are not. I think you know a lot more."

Plankett listened to the fluorescent lights hum above Dunbar's battered desk for a moment. He studied the dark, intense, and compact figure of the cop behind the desk. Was this another accusation? Did Dunbar want to trip him up? Or was he just saying that Plankett knew more than he realized?

"The man was practically a complete stranger to me," Plankett said finally, with irritation.

"Even after you had dinner twice, went to a jazz show and had

drinks, plus that shopping trip together . . . ”

“We were just on our way back to the hotel after lunch when he bought the hat. It was no ‘shopping trip together.’ ”

“Lunch?” Dunbar said quietly, as if he had unearthed a deliberate lie.

“I didn’t mention that because I didn’t think it mattered,” Plankett said. “We happened to bump into each other in the hotel lobby on the way out yesterday at noon, and it would have been awkward, us both going out, you see, not to, well, so . . . ”

“Why go out to lunch when your convention was having one?”

Plankett didn’t like the tone of that one, either.

“I wanted to buy a gift for the wife,” he said. “Killoran had some idea about sniffing around the French Quarter for a travel article of some kind. Fancied himself a writer. Said there was an exhibition of pictures he wanted to see. He had an address.”

“And what was the address?”

“I don’t know,” Plankett said truthfully. “We split up before then. I needed to find a gift and I didn’t care about looking at old pictures of New Orleans prostitutes.”

Plankett thought he saw Dunbar jump slightly. But the cop casually reached for his own Styrofoam cup and stared over the rim at him. The eyes said continue.

“Frankly, I was surprised Killoran didn’t want to wander down Royal Street to look in the antique stores with me. I could have used his help. It seemed like the stuff was badly overpriced. Anyways, we made arrangements to meet at this gumbo place a half hour later. He said they had the best jambalaya in New Orleans.”

Plankett had felt that Killoran’s confidence in his restaurant, bar, and jazz club recommendations were as cocky as the hat he had picked out. Still, the man had the style and taste to pull it off.

Killoran was older. Plankett guessed late fifties. But for all his easy friendliness, there was something odd and awkward about him, like he was hiding out behind those thick glasses. Plankett was reminded of the security peephole in his hotel room door.

“These pictures,” Dunbar said, “did he tell you about them?”

“Oh, yes. He seemed quite excited about the pictures. Said they were the genuine article or some such thing. Originals, I think was the word he used. I said I honestly was out of my element with photos. Thought they were a rip. How many original pictures can be made off a single negative, I ask you. Plenty. Besides, these sounded like old French postcards to me.”

"Did Killoran say who the photographer was?"

"More than once. Name didn't mean anything to me. He said I had to have heard it. Famous guy. The subject of some movie."

"*Pretty Baby*," Dunbar said.

"Beg your pardon?"

"The movie. It was *Pretty Baby*. Susan Sarandon, Brooke Shields."

It was Plankett's turn to stare.

"Based on what you're telling me," Dunbar said, "the photographer is E. J. Bellocq. He shot portraits of the women of Storyville—the local bordellos—after the turn of the century. He's quite well known here, and among collectors everywhere."

Dunbar's whole posture changed suddenly from passive to active without his leaving the desk chair. He leaned forward ominously. Plankett felt an increased pressure to talk.

"I think that was the name, yes, Bellocq," he said. "There was a reproduction of one of his photos in the bar Killoran took me to tonight. Some woman in her underwear and striped stockings. The bartender insisted it was a different photographer, and Killoran just laughed at him like he was completely ignorant."

"Why did you go to the bar?"

"For a drink, of course." Plankett felt the edge returning, and the cooling coffee in his cup was losing its tonic effect. He drained it with one final chug. "They don't serve anything at Preservation Hall during the jazz concerts. Nothing. Which surprised me, I gotta say. Somebody tried to carry in one of those hurricanes from that overcrowded bar next door, but they stopped him and made him finish it outside."

"But why go to a bar that was more than four blocks away from Bourbon Street when you had the most famous strip of saloons in the South just around the corner?"

"Hey, ask Killoran that, why don't you? It was his idea. I was just tagging along, remember?"

Plankett let the uncomfortable pause stretch out and studied Dunbar's reaction. Even when Plankett got indignant, the cop held the upper hand. Hey, Plankett thought angrily, Dunbar knew the joint Killoran had led him to. Let him guess why it was that one. Dunbar also knew they sat in there for more than an hour, that the conversation dwindled and yet Killoran had still ordered another round. Let him puzzle that one out.

Plankett had seen Dunbar study the chalk outline on the side-

walk just outside the place, drawn as a silhouette of Killoran's crumpled body, right through the drying lake of his blood. It marked the exact spot where Killoran dropped after the man in the mask released his grip, ripped the camera from Killoran's shoulder, and fled.

As far as Plankett was concerned, that crude outline told Dunbar almost as much about Killoran as Plankett felt he knew after the seventy-two hours of their bizarre acquaintance.

"I thought he might have mentioned why," Dunbar said quietly.

"No, you didn't. Not at all. You don't really believe I know anything. You already have your theories, I can tell. You're just toying with me for your own amusement, to fill up your time, to justify some entry on a time card or in a file folder. Let's get this charade over with. I'm tired. It's already past three. I've told you everything I know."

The gravity of the accusation seemed to wound Dunbar, who didn't budge one muscle to display it. Plankett felt as if Dunbar's body language were radiating out to him on microwave signals or something instead.

"Fine, Mr. Plankett," Dunbar said with resignation. "I'll let you go."

Something in his tone said Plankett would regret it. Still Plankett stood and stretched and looked around like he'd left a briefcase sitting someplace in the corner.

"Of course," said Dunbar, "at some point the man in the mask is going to realize how much you might know. Then he'll come looking for you. Only he won't bother with a mask this time."

Plankett sat down abruptly to get off his wobbly legs. This was the very thought he had been so determined to avoid. Dunbar's saying it out loud hit him like a shot to the solar plexus. All night since the murder he had worked at blocking off this troubling idea, denying the possibility he was mixed up in something, looking forward to packing to go home. It was all going to be okay. Dunbar seemed to read his thoughts.

"Of course, if we could find and arrest this man, you'd be safe," Dunbar said.

Plankett tried to look compliant. His nerves felt frayed by the caffeine's battle with the alcohol and the fatigue. "You want me to look at mug books?" he offered.

"What good would that do?" Dunbar said. "No, I believe you have all the answers we need in your head."

"I've told you everything."

"No, you haven't."

Stalemate. Plankett honestly could not think of another thing.

"Let me give you some help," Dunbar said. "First, some background. An extremely rare and valuable collection of original Bellocq photographs is missing. Stolen last month. Approximate value, a half million dollars."

"For those things?"

"Your acquaintance was ideally suited to fence such hot property. An out-of-state antiques dealer with a wealthy client list and a reputation for knowing the genuine article. He could probably unload them quietly at near market prices to very appreciative collectors. A seventy-five-year-old original printed by Bellocq himself is very rare."

"Only your friend must have been greedy. Haggled too much over the price maybe. He might even have hinted at some blackmail to get his way. Anyway, he was suddenly no longer a contender for the merchandise. He was a distinct liability. He knew who had the stuff. He might even have made an incriminating photo with his camera."

"Couldn't the address you want be in Killoran's stuff? Why don't you search his room and his pockets?"

"My men have been doing all that since we've been sitting here. If they had found anything at all, this phone would have rung. You are my only hope, Mr. Plankett. You're right, I have my theories. But they are not enough. I need your eyewitness statement."

Plankett lowered his head and rubbed his burning eyes and his perspiring brow.

"How did I get myself involved in this?" he said.

"You were Killoran's insurance policy," Dunbar answered. "You look like you can handle yourself in a scrape. He figured they wouldn't try anything with an outsider around. Another miscalculation. I would guess he had arranged to meet them at that bar, close the deal with you still in view but safely out of earshot. He probably had another confederate holding the cash a short phone call away. But they backed away when they saw you with him. They probably intended to lead him somewhere to kill him. They had to improvise instead."

"They, you keep saying they. Why?"

"I'd rather not say. What we need is a name, Mr. Plankett."

"I've told you, I'm no good at names."

"You do seem to have a Teflon coating on your brain that allows them to slide right off," Dunbar agreed, restraining the sarcasm in his voice. "My own memory for names is often the result of tricks. I find some word association that fits. Like with your name. I think of wood and it pops in."

Plankett didn't want to ask why he'd chosen that.

"Sometimes you can even make up one of those gags that used to be popular years ago, the odd marriages. Such as if A married B, she'd be some silly-named C. My favorite was the one in which the actress, Tuesday Weld, married the golfer, Don January, Jr., and became Tuesday January the Second."

Plankett wanted to laugh, but he choked instead. It just seemed so uncharacteristic of Dunbar to be making a joke. Then it struck him. Dunbar was leading him to the answer.

"Good God!" he said when he recovered himself. "I can't believe it. Killoran wasn't confused about the date. He was trying to tell me a name! August ten. What? Augustine? No. Augustin, Augusten, Augusden, I don't know. Is that the name you're looking for?"

Dunbar smiled. He reached for his phone and punched in four numbers.

"Richardson? You boys over there want to close the Bellocq case? Pick up Willy Oggsten. Yes. Well, wake up Judge Moseby and get a search warrant if you need it. You'll probably find the missing photographs at his place. If not, we'll have to reach a little and charge him with accessory to murder. Which reminds me. Watch out for a guy with a rehabbed face who works for him. He's quick with a blade. Pick him up, too. What? You do have probable cause. Yes. Well, I'll tell you what grounds you give Moseby."

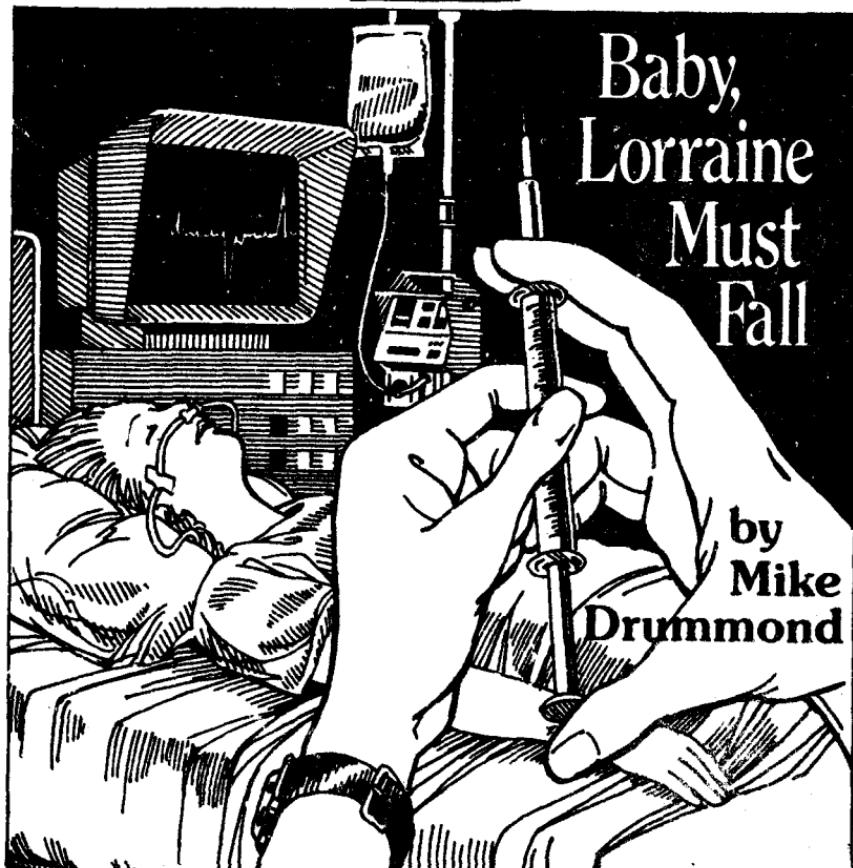
Dunbar looked at Plankett and winked.

"Tell him you have the word of a dying man."

FICTION

Baby, Lorraine Must Fall

by
**Mike
Drummond**



On the surface, the town of Del Oro retains a no-tech atmosphere even though several high-tech Bay Area companies have relocated their corporate headquarters to expensive pine-covered campuses nearby. Del Oro Group, or "the Group," is the biggest and employs almost half of those in town who want to be employed, which in

this sleepy Sierra foothill community is not everyone. The last time anyone could remember full employment, Roosevelt was still in office and the gold mines were operating full tilt to support the war effort—which is to say, a long, long time ago. The medical dark ages by today's standards.

And that was where our local hospital facilities had lan-

guished until the yuppies and the teckies with their major medical coverages overran the surrounding forest, displacing what was left of the more benign and ecologically correct hippies. There are those who say the foothills on the western slope of the Sierra will never be the same.

On one level I welcome the newcomers. Their presence proves my theory is right, and I stand to make a killing, figuratively speaking, with the land I bought in anticipation of just such an eastward migration from shaky San Francisco and points south. On another level, I see old Del Oro changing, losing forever the sleepy charm of its quaint main drag, all of two blocks long, replete with sturdy brick office buildings and Victorian mansions covered with gingerbread fret-work. It is being overtaken by the sordid flamboyance of stucco, plastic, and neon lighting that appear in not one but two rather tasteless shopping centers—shopping centers with acres of parking lots where grassy meadows and towering pines had been.

But as much as I regret that aspect of it, the growth isn't all bad. For one thing, the Del Oro Memorial Hospital Foundation is back on its feet, acquiring modern equipment to replace

its dwindling stock of mustard plasters and leeches, and the hospital board has attracted some energetic administrative talent from outside the area. Things had been getting a little inbred in Del Oro in recent years, and what we all needed was fresh blood, although not in the gory way we got it.

Let me take you back to the beginning.

I learned of Lorraine's accident the same way everyone else in town did, from the lurid headlines in the *Dispatch*, Del Oro's daily scandal sheet. There were photos, of course, in the worst of tabloid journalistic tradition: blood and gore, bits of exposed thigh, hints of cleavage—all in stark blacks and whites made more harsh by the photographer's flash. Boggs, the *Dispatch*'s doughnut-loving editor who doubles as his own and only ace reporter, was equally blunt. It was a variation on the "Tree Leaps in Front of Speeding Car" story that he ran almost weekly to underline the fact that this is a county of narrow winding roads. In Lorraine's case the headline screamed, "Hospital Hedonist Hits Head-on."

Lorraine Oaks, the hospital's administrator, was not what I'd call a hedonist. Fortyish, attractive, charismatic, and in a high-profile job—she was glam-

orous by Del Oro standards, and she did seem to enjoy comfort, as anyone who had visited her home could attest. In the six months since she moved to town, she had completely renovated the old Westley manse—not the exterior, of course, the ladies of the Historical Society would never permit that. But inside one found a decorating style that was a cross between late Elvis and early Hefner. We'd all seen it during the otherwise ho-hum home tour the Hospital Foundation sponsored as a fundraiser a few months ago.

Scandalous, some said. What would the Victorians have said about mirrored ceilings and a hot tub in the master bedroom? Personally, I think they'd have liked it. I know I liked the idea myself, but then, I'm not a native son. But it seemed decadent to some, making Lorraine a perfect gossip column target, and Boggs didn't sell newspapers by agreeing with liberals, or with me for that matter. He did it by pandering to the lowest common denominator, which in Del Oro can be alarmingly low.

Lorraine Oaks had been alone, driving on one of the narrow two-laners north of town, when her car mysteriously veered from the road and struck the base of a cedar tree

whose trunk was nearly as wide as her foreign sports car's front axle. I say mysteriously because there was no mention of drugs or alcohol, and no skid marks.

Later that evening some half-lost tourists from Indiana, wandering in their Winnebago, came upon the scene and radioed for help. Their prompt first aid saved Lorraine's life... for the time being. One of the tourists was a talkative veteran emergency room nurse whose life away from work seemed as fraught with mishaps and calamity as any E.R. in the country. Boggs ran a sidebar to Lorraine's story that featured this woman's rambling, stream-of-consciousness litany of skulls pierced by Ginsu knives, squashed body parts, and multiple organ failures, names withheld, of course, since the next of kin were still living. The *Dispatch* can't have too much blood on the front page.

Lorraine Oaks is dead now, of course. What I knew of her I liked. She was one of the few attractive and intelligent women I'd met since I moved to Del Oro from L.A. a few years ago. I had found her to be warm and personable and a great salesperson. Unfortunately, office emergencies forced her to cancel the two dinner dates

we'd set, and I never actually spoke to her face to face except in a crowd scene at some sort of function.

The interesting thing is that Lorraine Oaks didn't die from her injuries. Oh, they were serious enough, but a woman of her age and good health should have easily recovered. She died from the treatment she received in her own hospital. Something to do with an error in reading her potassium level and an over-correction that led to sudden heart failure.

What else is new? the more jaded might ask. Well, I agree. I would have chalked up Lorraine's death as an extremely ironic one if a young man hadn't burst into my office late one Tuesday morning, just as I'd added another issue of the *Wall Street Journal* to the stack that was growing in the corner.

"Are you the detective?" he asked without preliminaries, leaning over my desk, his coke-bottle specs just inches from my face. He was about twenty-five, lean and nervous, and badly in need of a fashion coordinator.

"Not really," I said, and went on to explain how the PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR stencils on my door and on the window facing the street were left by a Hollywood production company that used the building as background for a Sam Spade-like

deodorant commercial a while back.

"But you are Ross MacKenzie, aren't you?"

"Guilty," I said.

"I read about you. You solved the Norbison murder and found that chubby kidnapped girl in the woods."

"I doubt that my niece would appreciate being referred to as 'chubby,' but you are correct. I am licensed, but I only work on cases that interest me. And in my low-tech way, I do tend to stumble onto the right clue or the wrong body eventually."

"Then you're my man," he declared. "My last chance."

"I take it you've already gone over to St. Oona's, said a novena to old St. Jude, and torched a few votive candles?"

The light in his eyes flickered out for a moment and then blazed forth again. The boy had a one-track mind and the tenacity of a pit bull, which was probably why he was as successful as he was.

"I'm Gary Foster," he said self-importantly, "Vice-President of Design, Medical Division, Del Oro Group."

"Ah, you're with the Group," I nodded.

He looked like he expected me to salute, but I didn't see any insignia that said he outranked me, unless I counted the familiar company-issue

plastic pocket shield that was peeking from beneath the lapel of his well-made but slightly rumpled suit.

"They say a programming glitch caused her death, but it just isn't so," he yelled. "DAN works perfectly."

It was time for my eyes to glaze over. Many people in Del Oro had the irritating habit of referring to everyone by their first name—as if the town were still small enough for only one of each. Actually, I was the only "Ross" I could think of, but there were at least a dozen Dans.

"Dan?" I asked. "One of your programmers?"

"No, no. D-A-N . . . Distributed Applications Network. Surely you've read about it," he said witheringly. "This was the pilot program in the medical field, and Ms. Oaks was our test case."

"Look, Mr. Foster," I said, controlling myself. "I know just enough about computers to keep from getting my floppy caught in the wringer, but beyond that, you're ASCIIing too much."

Foster smirked and calmed down a little, but not before he tried to make me feel inadequate in my relative computer illiteracy. Notice, I said "tried." He didn't succeed, although his tale did hold my interest. I al-

ready knew a little about computer networks. Dow-Jones had a news retrieval service, for example, and I'd heard of InterNet, which linked almost every university computing center in the nation. Then there were electronic bulletin boards available to anyone who had a modem and the desire to get involved.

Foster's story was this: Distributed Applications Network, or DAN, is a software package developed by Mr. Foster's division of the Del Oro Group. It allows people located in different places—say, New York and San Diego—to work on the same file at the same time and to see each other's work instantaneously. This was especially important in engineering and design, where scarce and/or eccentric high-priced experts are located at odd places around the globe. The increased efficiency and savings of such a system were obvious even to a relative computer dunce like myself.

Lorraine Oaks, out to make a name for herself in a hurry, had Foster develop a custom version of the program to work with the diagnosis and treatment section of the hospital's newly formed trauma unit.

Now, a trauma unit would seem an unnecessary expense for a tiny community like Del

Oro, especially since high-tech work isn't all that dangerous, but the hospital is in close proximity to a dozen popular ski resorts and to a stretch of I-80 that is particularly treacherous as it winds down the western slope of the Sierra Nevada range. Previously, trauma victims were flown to big budget hospitals in Reno or Sacramento, each at least thirty minutes farther away at a time when every second counts.

Now prominent medical specialists were magically on-line in Del Oro from Seattle, Houston, Palo Alto, Sacramento, and Beverly Hills. A little hospital like Del Oro Memorial could never afford such a prestigious unit full-time, but with modems and mirrors, anything was possible. Somehow Lorraine made it happen in record time.

Little did she know she was frantically building the engine of her own death.

"According to the newspaper," I said, "the computer system let her down."

"There are zero glitches in that system," Foster insisted. "Human error, maybe. G.I.G.O."

"Guy-go? Is that anything like zoo-doo?" I asked. "I read recently that zoos are recycling exotic animal dung at a hefty profit. I think it was in one of

last week's *Journals*." I made a move toward my stack.

"G.I.G.O.," he said impatiently. "Garbage In, Garbage Out. The system works, but not if some idiot is running it."

"Sort of like this country," I muttered to myself.

"Look, everyone blames Lorraine . . . Ms. Oaks's death on DAN, and I need your help to prove it isn't so. DAN is my ticket to computational immortality, and I'm meeting sabotage at every turn. And if that wasn't enough, that idiot Val is pressuring the board to ask for my resignation."

"That idiot Val" whom Mr. Foster referred to was Valentine March, president of the Group and another Del Oro newcomer. He and I were both members of the Cousin Jake Club, Del Oro's only service club. I can't say I cared for him much myself. Val had the look of an aging but well-preserved matinee idol: fit, deeply tanned, a luxuriant mane of prematurely white hair, and a sparkling set of what appeared to be his own teeth. He owned an enviable fleet of vintage sports cars which he had rebuilt from the ground up. He relished his reputation as both a mechanic and driver. He also tried to cultivate a reputation as a roué—a ladies' man—although to my knowledge he was resting on

some withered laurels, since no gossip had ever linked him to any of the local possibilities, few as they were.

Val, along with his less well-preserved wife, the plump and pallid Marcie—whose uncle co-founded the Group—made at least a token appearance at all the major Del Oro social events.

"A man of your obvious talents shouldn't have any trouble landing another position," I said.

"It's not DAN's fault. And I'm not about to leave with a cloud over my head, you idiot," Foster screamed.

There was that word again. I don't like being called an idiot by people half my age, especially when I've done nothing idiotic. That thought must have shown clearly on my face as I rose from my chair. Foster backed away instinctively.

"I'm sorry," he said petulantly, "I can't get another job anywhere near Silicon Valley. In case you haven't noticed, I don't have the best people-skills, and I've already bruised some world-class egos."

"I'm not about to go poking around so you can blame Lorraine's death on some over-worked, underpaid nurse's aide," I said.

"And I don't want you to," Foster said quietly before con-

tinuing. "I talked to that girl—I.Q. in the low double digits by the way. She did what the computer told her. Gave me a Nurembergian 'just following orders.' But someone made a mistake, and with that idiot Val banging his cane and howling in my ears, I don't have time to find out who that is. All I know is that it isn't DAN. DAN is an elegant tool, but in the end it is only a conduit, only as good as its input. G.I.G.O."

"Guy-go," I said as we panned the deal. "I'll file that among my favorite acronyms: AWOL, ASAP, YUPPIE, SCUMI (Socially Conscious Unless Money Involved), and those old accounting standbys, FIFO and LIFO."

LIFO, Life-oh... last in, first out. As the memory of Lorraine's smile moved across my mind's eye, I wondered if the good do die young.

Other than the night nurse who inadvertently administered the coup de grace to Lorraine, three people had access to DAN and two of them had never set foot in Del Oro Memorial. Thanks to the Hospital Foundation's annual fundraising drive, I had a slick brochure with photos and bios on each of them: Drs. Blaine Haddock, Sam Kolatch, and

Amber Eterna. All three were elite physicians—renowned specialists. Each no doubt with an ego every bit as inflated as those that Foster had so easily bruised.

"Yosemite Sam" Kolatch—so called because of his well-publicized love of nature—was the easiest to contact. I'd heard him speak once at an awards banquet. He was a lifelong bachelor based in Sacramento, but he spent a good deal of time at his mountain retreat on Miocene Rise, about twenty rugged miles from Del Oro.

A boyish voice, not Sam's, answered the phone when I called, and I spent a couple of minutes on hold before I got my appointment and a detailed set of directions.

I stopped by my own lakeside cabin to exchange the Benz for my four by four truck, and to let my watchcat Dennis try to wheedle an extra can of cat food. But Dennis was busy down at the lake waiting patiently by a mound of dirt, playing the original game of cat-and-mouse. I warmed up the truck and took off.

The directions the boy had insisted on giving to me turned out to be necessary. The approach to Miocene Rise is a dirt and gravel track with very few meaningful street signs. A quarter mile past the second-

left-fork-after-the-rusted-out-car landmark, I saw the plain cyclone fence that marked the entrance to the commune. Inside the fence was a square mile of idyllic meadowlands, ponds, garden plots, and graveled pathways. I knew that somewhere, tucked into the trees, a couple of hundred gentle souls were busy seeking their way on the "spiritual path."

My immediate concerns were path-oriented, but in a more "grounded" sort of way. I kept my eye on the pavement ahead of me and soon located Kolatch's sturdy cottage situated on the edge of a two acre pond. A fawnlike teenaged boy, barefoot, dressed in an outsized Hawaiian shirt and cotton drawstring pants, answered the door and led me through the house. We passed an indoor sunken garden shimmering in the glow of a prism-shaped skylight, and walls covered with East Indian art, and quiet little rooms shut off by fragile shoji screens. One screen didn't quite conceal an elaborate computer setup in an alcove.

Sam Kolatch, attired much like the boy, was seated outside on a bench built into the stone stairway that led down to the water's edge. The hillside was lush with vegetation, and ducks paddled placidly among the cattails.

Kolatch's eyes brightened as we approached.

"Mr. MacKenzie. You had no trouble finding the place?"

"None at all," I said.

Kolatch's eyes shifted in a private signal to the boy as I spoke, and when I turned, he was already retreating up the stairway. Kolatch's eyes followed him for a moment before returning to me.

"Son?" I asked.

"Oh no, I've never married." Kolatch flashed a brief multi-level smile. "As you can see, I have plenty of room here. Over the years I've had a number of 'visitors.' Kahlil is just one of the young ones seeking his place on the path."

His eyes defied me to pursue that subject, and I wasn't up to a self-righteous sociology lecture, so I stayed on task. His smile vanished completely when I asked him about Lorraine Oaks.

"I was monitoring her condition from here the day of her death. I overrode the nurse on duty based on the data on my computer screen. Apparently those data were in error, but I have no hard copy, no permanent record, no proof. The hospital's records, of course, don't agree now with what I know I saw that day."

"Could the records have been tampered with intentionally?"

"Possibly . . . obviously from my point of view, I think they were. But isn't that a question best answered by that rather unadorable waif, the boy genius you call your client?"

"Foster can be unadorable," I agreed, "and everyone says he's a genius, but a waif?"

"Abandoned at birth, bounced through a series of foster homes. Claims he took his last name as a tribute to his past."

"You seem to know a lot about Foster."

Kolatch shrugged. "We consulted regularly as his DAN system took shape. And we had other interests in common."

"Such as?"

Kolatch nodded downhill. Bales of hay were stacked at one end of a private archery range.

"Bow hunting?" I asked.

"Certainly not. Have you ever seen an animal that has been shot with an arrow, Mr. MacKenzie? They might take hours or even days to die. It's a very cruel way to go."

"Anyway, I'm a vegetarian. Can't imagine torturing something and then eating it. Archery is simply a form of relaxation for me, one that Foster shared."

I tried to imagine a relaxed Gary Foster but couldn't.

"Who else might have had

access to the hospital's computer files?" I asked.

Kolatch's face darkened. "I'm sorry, I really can't say any more. My attorney says I shouldn't speak to anyone until the claim is settled."

"What claim? Malpractice? Who filed it?"

"If my beliefs allowed it, I'd say Lorraine did, from some posh place beyond the grave. She could be extraordinarily vindictive and manipulative. Especially when she didn't approve of something."

Kolatch's eyes shifted up toward the cottage where silent Kahlil waited. He cleared his throat before he continued.

"Unfortunately, these are things you will find out if you talk to the others on staff," he said. "She was very harsh with the clerical people as well. I wouldn't normally speak about this, but I don't want you to think of your trip out here as an entire waste."

"And the lawsuit?"

"Her 'loving' daughter, I believe," he sighed.

"I didn't know she had one."

Kolatch nodded.

"Regina Oaks. A pre-med major at one of the colleges on the coast."

Kolatch screwed up his face and plucked a flower from an urn near his elbow.

"Apparently 'sweet Lorraine'

wasn't always the complete ice maiden bitch I came to know so well," he said.

"Does Regina have enough evidence to bring a case to court?"

"In today's legal system, what isn't enough?"

"How's that for an ethical dilemma?" I asked. "Student pays her way through medical school with the proceeds of a malpractice settlement."

Kolatch shifted his gaze and stared out over the pond.

"It would be poetically just," he murmured, "had I knowingly done anything wrong."

I left a few minutes later. The questions I'd asked Kolatch were like angry pebbles shattering the calm surface of a pond. He sat quietly on the bench, trying to smooth the discordant ripples on the once serene surface of his soul.

Two phone calls to a friendly voice on the hospital switchboard netted me more information than I had any right to expect. There was a lawsuit filed against the hospital and the three computer-networked attending physicians by a legal firm based in Marin County acting on behalf of one Regina Oaks. I figured it was a case of a deadbeat relative trying to dip into some corporate deep pockets for an easy retirement nest

egg. And yet I would have bet that any kid of Lorraine's would have had more on the ball. Sometimes grief does strange things to people.

A third call, this one to Dr. Amber Eterna's Seattle office, was less cordial, but eventually it became clear that for several weeks the doctor's movements had been confined to the decks of a luxury ocean liner now bound for Hong Kong. It was Dr. Eterna's first vacation in years. Eterna's hospital brochure mug shot showed her to be an attractive woman, early thirties . . . I wondered idly if she was traveling alone.

I realized, without getting too technical, that modern satellite technology would allow Dr. Eterna to tap into the Del Oro Hospital computer from anywhere in the world. But I doubted that a doctor on vacation would be going to that much trouble—especially with two other specialists, Kolatch and Haddock, so much closer at hand. If Dr. Eterna had murder on her mind, she would have had sense enough not to attempt it long distance when the logistics were so cumbersome and traceable.

Rather than risk ruining the good doctor's shuffleboard game, I decided to concentrate my immediate efforts a little closer to home. Too bad, she

looked like she would have been worth interviewing.

I had put off tying up some loose ends on one of my personal investments in the Bay Area, and the added impetus of a visit to Dr. Blaine Haddock brought the whole thing to critical mass. Unfortunately, being a Southern California boy and capable of going anywhere on the L.A. freeway grid blindfolded, I still haven't acquired the driving savvy needed to navigate in even a non-shaky San Francisco.

My first mistake was miscalculating rush hour. Apparently it lasts all day. It had been two years since I'd had to endure L.A.'s version and I'd forgotten how tiring it can be. On the map, the stretch of I-80 from Hercules to the Bay Bridge south of Berkeley looks like a fifteen minute drive at freeway speeds.

Two hours and several muscle cramps later, I rolled over the bridge and off on Fifth Street, and went through my regular San Francisco ritual of trying to get to the other side of Market Street. Already I missed the slower pace of Del Oro.

The meeting with my investors was heated at times, but Barry, my accountant and business partner, had the figures to

back me up so after a brief flareup, all ended well.

The afternoon drive down 101 toward Palo Alto was less eventful than my morning commute, or perhaps I was getting back into the rhythm of city life. Blaine Haddock had reluctantly agreed to a ten minute interview in the hospital cafeteria at three o'clock that afternoon. From his tone I half expected him to cut the meeting even shorter, arrive late, or cancel altogether. But since I needed a face-to-face, I held up my end of the bargain.

Blaine Haddock was immediately recognizable from his brochure mug shot, although for some reason I'd imagined him six or eight inches taller and more robust. He stood about five feet two and weighed in around a hundred and twenty pounds, including the rings and the Rolex. His complexion was ashen, his movements lethargic. He rarely looked me in the eye, and during our conversation he conspicuously marked the progress of several attractive females as they slid their trays along the counter from appetizers to desserts and on toward the cashier.

"What can I tell you, MacKenzie? Kolatch was monitoring her condition that night. I was on call, but nobody called until it was over."

Dr. Haddock took a deep drag on his unfiltered cigarette and paused for effect.

"Not that Lorry's death broke me up."

"What do you mean?"

"You knew we were married, of course."

I hadn't, and it must have shown. Haddock chuckled.

"I can't tell you how long we were married," he said, "but I can certainly tell how long we've been divorced . . . to the dollar."

"Child support?"

"No children, my friend. Lorry acquired the kid during one of her mysterious slumming expeditions, long before she acquired a taste for the finer things."

"Meaning you?"

"More correctly, my credit rating. Lorry didn't have much before I came along, you know."

I figured she didn't have much with him. What I was thinking must have shown on my face. Haddock saw it, but wouldn't acknowledge it. He kept talking.

"Too bad about the kid being stashed away in boarding schools, but hey, I didn't want her around either."

"Either?"

"Never a dull moment with Lorry. Those were some wild times, no place for a kid."

Haddock's mood shifted. "In

any event, I've been supporting her mama in style ever since."

"Why go in on her trauma program then?"

"It's the first of its kind anywhere on a computer network," he said unconvincingly.

Then, with more gusto, he added, "Look, I'm the best at what I do, and this was a way to prove it—to distance myself from the pack. The publicity potential is enormous."

"Negative publicity," I said.

Haddock nodded. "I hadn't worked that into the equation," he frowned, "but I was negotiating an alimony phase-out."

"Meet with any resistance?" I asked.

Haddock concentrated on knocking the ash from his cigarette. He had more to say, but the P.A. system blared, paging Dr. Haddock. He started to speak, thought better of it, stubbed out his smoke and excused himself.

It had been a long and not-so-productive day, and I faced the prospect of bucking homebound commuter traffic for at least the first third of my hundred and fifty mile return trip. Before I left the hospital, I called my machine to check for messages. There were several.

Barry, my accountant-business partner, was already back

in L.A. and whining again, but it was nothing that couldn't wait until tomorrow. The next call was from Gary Foster, who was doing some whining of his own. He wanted, demanded actually, a complete progress report. The computer age—instant response, facts at your fingertips—no one had any patience any more. I looked at my watch. I had been on the case less than twenty-four hours. I made a note to put him in touch with Barry; maybe together they could open a whinery.

The last call was the one I was looking for. Regina Oaks, Lorraine's daughter, returning my call. I had traced her to a small college in the vicinity of Silicon Valley. Hers was a young woman's voice, cool and businesslike, informing me that any further attempts at contacting her would result in a call from her attorneys. While that didn't scare me—I respect attorneys for the damage they can do with a few papers and some words, but I don't think much of them as a class of human beings—I did decide to shelve any further investigation involving Miss Oaks for the time being.

I had a leisurely dinner in a little vegetarian restaurant I spotted in Milpitas and arrived home around eleven P.M. I was exhausted.

Dennis greeted me at the door.

"Glad to see me, old boy?" I asked.

"Ow-meow-ow," he snarled and turned away from me, his tail in the air.

I figured he must be hungry. I went into the kitchen, checked his food dish, and saw the half-eaten remains of a rather large rodent. No wonder Dennis was angry. He'd fixed dinner for both of us, and I hadn't bothered to let him know I'd be late.

The next morning, Thursday, I rehashed the details over a mug of morning cocoa on my sun deck. There was no sun that day, but the view was still beautiful. The upper reaches of the ponderosa swayed in a gentle breeze. The lake had receded a few feet from the high water mark and was waiting for a replenishing storm. Winter rains were due any day.

I hadn't narrowed the field at all. Neither Kolatch nor Haddock cared what happened to Lorraine, unless it affected their careers. They had to know that the publicity her death was bound to generate would cloud those careers. There was no way either man was going to slip all the blame onto the computer.

According to Haddock, Regina Oaks was shunted to boarding schools as a child and now was studying to be a doctor herself. Could she also be a sinister computer hacker (she certainly lived in the right neighborhood)? Still, I didn't want to believe that she would break into her own mother's file and alter it with murderous intent.

Finally, I wondered about Dr. Amber Eterna's relationship with Lorraine. In rereading her bio I realized that she had interned under the already famous Dr. Blaine Haddock. Was that all she'd done under him? (Now that would be a tough question to pose over the long distance line to Dr. Eterna.) And where would it lead? Was there some other unknown unprofessional link between Eterna and Lorraine?

Or did somebody just make a mistake? A fatal mistake, but an innocent one nonetheless. So far, I could build as strong a case for that scenario as for any other. I decided to give it a rest for a few hours and take in the biweekly meeting of the Cousin Jake Club.

The Jakes, as I mentioned, is a local service club, not unlike the Lions or the Rotary in purpose. The origin of the name is interesting. It traces its roots back to post-goldrush times,

when Del Oro was the center of the California gold industry. Most of the men who worked the mines were imported from the British Isles and tended to be clannish. There was a terrific depression going on in the old country, and every time there was an opening at the mines, someone was quick to tell the owner about their cousin Jake back home who could do the job. Old rosters of mine employees bear this out. Over half the miners were named John, Jack, or Jake. The term "Cousin Jake" came to mean any clansman or close friend.

Originally the Cousin Jake Club served as an exclusive private men's club, and its members were both formal and informal political advisors to the town's elected officials.

It really hasn't changed much. We meet in the banquet room of the Triangle Hotel. The room has a dark, massive mahogany backbar, high copper ceilings, crystal chandeliers, antique wallpaper, and an undulating oak plank floor. The food isn't great, but the inside information is usually first-rate. Most of the members attend religiously for that reason.

I arrived about ten minutes late and took one of the few remaining seats at a table near the back. It was easy to see why

chairs remained open at that table. Two of my tablemates were crusty oldtimers whom I knew to be almost totally deaf and who looked and smelled like they had already spent several hours at the bar. The other two chairs were taken up by Valentine March, One as a throne for his eminence, the other as a footstool for his plaster-encased leg and an ornately carved walking stick. Val nodded to me, and I couldn't help noticing the small Band-Aid on his forehead and the taped fingers on his right hand. He turned his attention to the speaker droning on at the head table, and I did the same.

During lunch I asked him what had happened.

"Nothing really," he puffed. "Damn golf cart got away from me in our driveway . . . up at the Shores."

The Marches had a retreat at Delpano Shores, tucked away in a secluded valley north of town, well above the snowline. It was a prestigious twenty lot subdivision that surrounded one of the many small lakes in the area. Guard at the gate, clubhouse, a marina under construction—a very promising investment. Most of the owners lived in the Bay Area or Los Angeles, and the few who lived close by, like Val March, used the Shores as a summer get-

away. The C.C. & R.'s placed on the development ensured that nothing short of small palaces would be built. Val March met or exceeded all the minimums and already had one of the few livable homes up there—a six thousand square foot "castle." Most of the lots, including mine, were undeveloped, being held on speculation.

"Must be lonely up there this time of year," I said. "And cold."

"I was closing the place up for the winter . . . alone."

"Hell of a drive to the emergency room."

"Jimmy the gateman took care of that," Val said. And then, to change the subject, added, "Solve any crimes lately?"

"As a matter of fact I am looking into Lorraine Oaks's death."

"Ah, for one of your insurance companies, no doubt."

"Lorraine Oaks went off the road not far from Delpano Shore, didn't she?" I asked.

"Couldn't be," Val said evenly. "That road goes all the way to Tahoe if you have the patience to follow it."

"She wasn't one of the members at Delpano, was she?" I asked.

"Not that I know of, but then sleuthing isn't my game."

I was still formulating a re-

sponse when Val gave an exaggerated wave to someone at one of the other tables.

"Excuse me, MacKenzie," he said. "Business before pleasure."

And I was alone at the table with two dozing drunks.

I had to pass Lorraine Oaks's place on the way out of town. I parked across the street to take another look. The Victorian was set well back from the street on a little knoll. From the picket fence, flowerbeds, and gingerbread on the outside there was no hint of the "libertine" interior. Idly I wondered what the asking price would be, although I wasn't interested in the house personally.

The only neighboring building was a low-slung white frame affair with a broad expanse of close-cut lawn dotted with leafless fruit trees and little islands of still yellow flowers. An old man armed with pruning shears was savagely abusing what looked like defenseless twigs stuck in the ground. He was dressed formally for garden work, like a Mormon missionary or maybe an IBM repairman: plain black pants, white shortsleeved shirt, clip-on black tie. A small flaking sign on the fence said, "Isaac, Rooms to Let."

I decided to see if the old guy knew what was going to happen to the house. I walked up the path toward him, but he was intent on his work and didn't turn around.

"Mr. Isaac? Mr. Isaac?"

When I touched his shoulder, the old man spun around with a jerk and began screwing both his ears violently with his thumbs.

"You here for a room?" he shouted. "I got two. No smoking, no drinking, no women, no checks, pay in advance."

He punctuated his irresistible sales pitch with a brief false smile, and fixed me with a pop-eyed stare. He had a gnarly, biblical face and looked old enough to have hoofed it up to the burning bush with Moses. He was also deaf as a post. Flesh-colored hearing aids were looped behind each hairy earlobe.

I increased my volume and explained who I was. Isaac seemed disappointed that he didn't have a customer.

"No need to yell, sonny. I got my ears turned on now," he shouted. "I can hear a pin drop with these babies."

Somehow I doubted that, but went ahead and asked my questions. Isaac didn't know what was going to happen to Lorraine's house, didn't even know there had been any renovations

done, although the noise must have been tremendous.

"That woman kept some strange hours," he said. "Comings and goings at all hours. Not that I'm a busybody, mind you. But I don't need much sleep. All that action over there reminded me of the cathouse we used to have down to the end of the street. But that was before the war."

I didn't ask which war, but I assumed he was referring to one I would be too young to remember.

"Anything else you can tell me about Ms. Oaks?"

"Not really," Isaac said. "Sure you don't want a room?"

I decided to humor him and let him take me on a tour. The interior of his place was dark and close, although at one time it must have been a very nice house. The rooms were clean but uninspired, and wouldn't rate a writeup in anyone's bed and breakfast guide. One room faced a narrow alley behind the house; the other was upstairs overlooking the street and facing Lorraine's house. I thanked the old man and said I would keep him in mind.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll give you a business card."

He rushed off somewhere and I waited in the hall. A guest register lay on a shelf by the door. Idly, I picked it up and

leafed through. The entries were all in the same tight hand, probably the old man's. From the looks of things he didn't get much business except during the height of the tourist season when everything else was booked. But two recent entries caught my eye.

Isaac returned and shoved the card into my hand.

"This name seems familiar," I said, pointing to the register. "Can you describe him?"

"Hmmmm . . . young fella. Nervous. Pushy. Went in and out a lot in the middle of the night. Didn't like him much, but he paid cash. Took the palatial suite upstairs."

"Did he say why?"

"Why? Must have liked the view. Who knows? I don't give my guests the third degree."

"I mean why did he stay here? He lives near town."

Isaac shrugged. "Fight with the missus?"

As far as I knew, Gary Foster wasn't married. Which gave him plenty of time to work on computer programs and keep tabs on me. When I dropped by my office, I found three more phone messages from him, each more insistent than the one before. I called him back and filled him in on the doctors.

"Any one of them could have done it," he yelled.

"You mean your program can't tell you who?"

"There's nothing . . . *no thing* wrong with DAN! One of those doctors must be acting strange. They'll crack."

"Right. Listen, I took a little tour of the Isaac estate today . . . you know, 'Rooms to Let.' Do you stay in town often?"

There was silence on the line. The voice that finally answered was much subdued, and a little defensive.

"You're good," he said. "I stayed there a few times when Ms. Oaks and I were putting the final polish on DAN. Made more sense than cruising all the way home."

"The last date was less than two weeks ago. Hasn't the system been in place for a few months?"

"Well, yeah. That old dummy must have the dates wrong. That idiot probably doesn't even know what year it is. And what does that prove about me and Lorraine anyway?"

"I'm not sure. Foster, do you have a girlfriend?"

"What does that have to do with anything? Look, MacKenzie, why don't you drop the whole thing. You aren't getting anywhere. Send me a bill, and I'll decide whether or not I'll pay."

The phone slammed down. I

was glad I didn't need his money, because I doubted that he would pay. He must be one hell of a programmer for the Dèl Oro Group to overlook his flawed personality. But some things were bothering me, and I was going to look into them, on my own time if need be.

No one was in the guard shack when I arrived, and the electric gate was chained shut. Exhaust clouds billowed from the Benz's tailpipes into the cold mountain air. After a minute I got out, vaulted the turnstile, and headed for the darkened clubhouse. The temperature was just above freezing and my ears began to sting. Overhead, the sky was grey, and the only sound was the crunch of gravel underfoot. The whole place felt deserted.

I slid my plastic passkey into the door lock and let myself in. Jimmy sat sprawled in a captain's chair facing the view of the lake. A well-used bottle of scotch was within easy reach of his hand, and an accordion of plastic covered billfold snapshots snaked across the table. As I drew even with him, he snore-snorted himself awake and jumped up at the sight of me.

"Ah, Mr. MacKenzie, ya got me with the goods."

Jimmy extended his closed fists toward me as if to accept the handcuffs.

"I'd tell you to relax, Jimmy, but from the looks of things you've already taken enough relaxant for two men your size."

"Well now, that's the truth, Mr. MacKenzie. It's this little sniffle I got. Can't seem to shake it."

Jimmy tapped the side of his vein-webbed nose. He was no older than I was, but he looked sixty. We were all a little shocked when Val March, quite out of character, recommended him for the job. The rumor was that Jimmy had lost his ambition and possibly part of his brain on a tour of duty with Uncle Sam's Southeast Asia Expeditionary Forces back in the early seventies. There had been quite a heated discussion when the Board of Directors hired him, but the other veterans in the group and I voted together. The job didn't call for much, and Jimmy filled the bill.

I watched as he gathered up his snapshots. They looked like family things, kids, groups of friends or relatives, grey and dogeared with age. It was hard for me to imagine the poison-bloated wreck before me as having been a young man fresh and energetic, looking hopefully toward the future.

I frowned, and Jimmy saw me glance at the bottle. He knew I was on the Delpano Shores Board of Directors.

"It's my own bottle, if that counts," he said. "I never touch the clubhouse inventory."

"That's not why I'm here, Jimmy," I said. "Do you remember Mr. March's accident?"

It took Jimmy a moment to shift gears, but eventually he nodded yes.

"Was he alone that day?" I asked.

"Ah, Mr. MacKenzie, you know members' affairs is private here. It's not for me to say. Now, if you was Sheriff Wyler, that would be different."

I poured three fingers into the sticky glass and slid it toward Jimmy. He eyed it greedily.

"What exactly would you tell Wyler?"

He seized the glass.

"Same as I told you," he said, "Mr. March was alone when I got to him. How he did that, I'll never know."

The implication was that Val hadn't spent the entire day alone, but I ran into a sodden stonewall in three go-arounds, and couldn't get Jimmy to say it.

"Did you call an ambulance?" I asked.

"No, no, I didn't. Mr. March

already called the motor pool at the Group, and they was sending a car and driver."

"And why was that?"

"Weren't no other car here but mine."

"How did he get here?"

"Mr. MacKenzie, I really can't say."

It was a long shot, but I had to ask.

"Do you remember the date?"

"Oh, sure," he said proudly. "It was the day Rainey crashed, you know, down on the highway to town."

"Rainey?"

Jimmy's face, already flush from the drink, reddened.

"Oh, you know . . . Ms. Oats, I mean Ms. Oaks. Let's see, what was that date?"

Talking about Lorraine agitated Jimmy, and I wanted to know why. It took two more drinks before the improbable story unfolded.

James Otis, once known as Jimmy Oats, had met Lorraine at a late sixties love-in in Griffith Park, and married her as she rebounded from a bad love affair with a married man. Jimmy and Lorraine shared similar backgrounds. Both had grown up in stucco housing tracts in different poor white neighborhoods that existed in pockets among the industrial sprawl that was southeast Los Angeles.

She claimed she had a child when she was sixteen, a boy that she gave up for adoption, but other than that was close-mouthed about much of her past.

Their marriage had been common law at first—a sign of the times—but legal by the time he was drafted into the army. It was an immature Lorraine who had married the pre-war edition of Jimmy, a man with a steady blue collar job and matching blue collar life. He showed me a picture of a grinning couple, teenagers really. The girl was a younger Lorraine, but I would never have guessed the athletic boy was Jimmy.

"It was a three-ring circus with Rainey. She was always improving things, taking classes, acting like royalty," he said. "We was a team. I made it and she spent it. Then came Uncle Sam. Rainey said I could beat the draft, knock her up . . . those was her exact words . . . and get deferred."

Jimmy sat back in his chair and a crooked grin spread across his face. "Certainly enjoyed trying.

"Anyway, they got me. And then I got her. Must have been on the last leave before we shipped out. Better late than never, I always say. She was pregnant, and I was on the

other side of the world. The last thing I remember reading before I got hit was her letter about the baby. Our baby . . . a little princess."

"Named Regina?" I asked, and Jimmy nodded and thumbed a worn snapshot from his folder.

"Then I came to five years later in the V.A. with no life, no kid, no wife. Rainey and Regina vanished, dropped out. I found her again on a fluke. Picture in the paper, Dr. and Mrs. Haddock. She looked great."

I nodded.

"She didn't want to see me at first," he continued. "Not until she knew I didn't want nothing from her but maybe a picture of the kid."

"That was all?"

"Aw, I know what you're thinking, Mr. MacKenzie, but I don't blame Rainey—not any more. Just look at me. Even I'd dump me, the way I am now."

"So she got you your picture?"

"And a security guard job at a Palo Alto outfit until I managed to drink that out from under me."

"And then this job?"

"Rainey spoke to Mr. March on my behalf."

"Was Rainey with March the day she died?" I asked.

Jimmy nodded.

"Did that bother you?"

"After all these years? We're different people now". She's not my wife. It's too late for that. Alcohol transcends sex . . . transcends it."

Transcends it, maybe. But doesn't make jealousy or anger disappear. Jimmy seemed sincere in his own fuzzy way.

But what motivated Lorraine? Was she acting out of guilt, or loyalty, or some warped desire to torture an old lover? Anything to keep the three-ring circus going?

Jimmy was the wrong one to ask. His short term memory became erratic. I asked more questions, but his answers were vague. He didn't act like he was hiding anything. If he had ever known anything, it was now hopelessly misfiled. I left him in the darkened room alone with his half-formed thoughts.

I still didn't know for sure if there was a connection between Val March's limp and Lorraine's auto accident, although it was a possibility. What if Val was in the car with her and had somehow struggled back to his place at the Shores? I checked that out on the way home. One of the bridle trails wasn't far from that stretch of highway. Why wouldn't he stay on the road until help arrived? Unless he

couldn't explain why he was with Lorraine. Maybe he really was the old roue he claimed to be. Jimmy hinted at it. But why didn't he dial 911 anonymously from his "castle"? And even if he did abandon her, that didn't make him directly responsible for her death. Unless, as president of the Group, he had access to the hospital's computer system—which of course he would have.

What if . . . I could imagine the expression on Sheriff Wyler's face if I presented him with this mishmash of stray bits of information and jumped-to conclusions. He would probably wipe one beefy hand over his massive face and sigh.

Which is exactly what he did the next day in his office.

"You been reading too many mystery novels, MacKenzie," Wyler said. "Why don't you just stick to Wall Street and those real estate deals of yours. This county doesn't need your help in dreaming up computer criminals when we still got the old fashioned kind."

"So you're not going to do anything?"

"Oh, I'll talk with Jimmy, early in the day of course, and check out his story. If March left her lying there to die, we got a problem, but we can't prove a thing if he stonewalls. Although, if he was injured in

the crash too, there could be traces of his blood in the wreckage."

Sheriff Wyler grimaced.

"Geez, I'm beginning to sound like you, MacKenzie. Here I got the biggest employer in three counties tried and convicted on some very flimsy conjecture by a part-time private eye. Let's give it a rest. For the time being, the coroner's report stands. Lorraine Oaks died from negligent hospital treatment and not the traffic accident."

A few days later I was flipping through the *Wall Street Journal* when the Del Oro Group name caught my eye in the Technology section. President Val March announced that the company was delaying the general release of their long awaited DAN system for an indefinite period of time.

I called Gary Foster's office, but my call was transferred to the personnel department. A clerk there told me Gary had been terminated and that no immediate successor had been named. When I pressed her on the DAN project, she transferred me back to programming. After several false starts a sarcastic programmer with a temperament that almost matched Gary's told me that Val March was huffing and

puffing about stepping in himself and completing the project. This seemed ludicrous to the programmer, since Val was no teckie. And for the moment anyway, the DAN project was officially in limbo.

That was Val March's last hurrah. The day after the *Journal* article, he was found dead in the driveway of his home, shot through his allegedly wandering eye by a high-powered crossbow. The tip of the bolt pierced the back of his skull. A computer diskette with a Del Oro Group label hung from the shaft, like a doughnut on a stick, obscuring his face. On his chest, forty pages of fan-folded computer paper, each page dense with single-spaced type—the fevered love story-confession of one Gary Foster.

It wasn't easy getting information from Sheriff Wyler. Even Boggs of the *Dispatch* failed. Normally a story like this would have been front page news for a month. But there was politics involved, family names to protect, and, of course, money. Whether it changed hands, when, where, or with whom, I can't say. I pieced together the rest of the story over a week's time from bits of several terse conversations with Wyler. He must have felt he owed me that much

from another murder case I'd been involved with. And he knew it wouldn't go beyond me.

Gary became obsessed with Lorraine Oaks as they labored together late into the night perfecting DAN. He began to believe that they were meant for each other, that fate had thrown them together to achieve both computer immortality and great personal love. When he made his awkward advances—other references in the confession indicated he might have been a virgin—she encouraged him, at least during the early stages of the project. She apparently slept with him twice.

He began to pour out his soul to her: his professional dreams and frustrations, his sad childhood and the story of abandonment. She seemed interested in him, especially when he spoke of his early years. According to Gary's narrative, she constantly asked him questions about where he was born and whom he thought his parents might be. And then suddenly, with no explanation, she turned cold. When he wanted to get physical, she rebuffed him quickly and harshly. Did he remind her of the child she had abandoned so many years before? Did she think he was that child? There was no one left alive for me to ask.

Gary turned out to be as sensitive in this one area of his life as he was insensitive in all the others. His obsession with Lorraine grew. He spent nights staring at her home from the darkened windows of Isaac's rooming house. He followed her everywhere he could. Eventually he learned of her affair with Val March, a married man with a mature style that Gary could not hope to possess. He imagined, rightly or wrongly, that they were plotting to discredit him and steal DAN's glory. His ultimate firing was certainly proof to him that he had been right all along.

But who killed Lorraine? Was she intentionally killed at all? Gary drew pleasure from tantalizing the reader for more than thirty pages, but in the end claimed credit. Unable to have Lorraine, he determined that no one would. Sitting in a bright, well-lit office on the third floor of the main building of the Del Oro Group, miles from the hospital, a mug of herb tea steaming by the computer keyboard, Gary typed the simple commands that altered Lorraine Oaks's charts and started the chain of events that ended her life.

And a short time later, after one long and enjoyable, off-the-

record evening spent with Dunne, Sheriff Wyler's female deputy, I came away with new perspective on the late Lorraine Oaks.

The lady with the mirrored ceiling kept a diary of sorts. Not a cute little book with a flimsy lock and florid prose, but a very thick, business-like manila folder with enough information to put together a do-it-yourself blackmail ring.

There were quite a few things in the file, including some evidence of activities that might prove embarrassing about each of the good doctors Kolatch, Haddock, and Eterna. Embarrassing, but not necessarily illegal. Since I wasn't mentioned, Dunne told me the details were really none of my business.

But a few things touched on my case. A foggy Polaroid from what looked like a hippie orgy with what could have been a teenaged Lorraine and what definitely was a young, and then dark-haired, Valentine March sharing the business end of a hookah and wearing about six square inches of clothing between them. What would the staid Marcie March think of that? Was Lorraine going to blackmail Val? And if so,

why? The woman must have thrived on turmoil.

There was also a birth certificate dated 1966—about the time Gary Foster was born—naming an unmarried Maxine Lorraine Potts and one V. Marks (a clever alias?) as the parents of a baby boy. Was it baby Gary? Now that would be a longshot.

Did Gary Foster come to my office that first day to ask me to discover that he was a murderer? Did he think he knew who his parents were? Did Val March even know that he had sired a son, whether it actually was Gary or not? I may never know what Gary wanted. Perhaps it was a twisted plea for help. I just don't have an answer.

Gary is still at large, by the way. Disappeared without a trace. But Wyler suspects that he'll turn up, working somewhere in a back room as a computer programmer, under an assumed name.

Changing a name is one thing, changing a personality is another. Do you know any abrasive, high-strung, irritable, know-it-all computer experts that might fit his description?

FICTION



The Cattlemen's Club

by David Braly

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1975

Jerry Wood slid out of the Buick and looked across the parking lot at the phone booth. The outside entrance light of the bar shone on it, and he could see that nobody was near it. Nor did anyone appear to be sitting in any of the twenty or so cars and pickups parked in the gravel light. The moon was almost full, so he would see somebody unless they deliberately hid. A car sped past on the highway. After it was gone, the only sounds Wood heard were the laughter and music from the little country bar and chirping of hundreds of crickets in the sagebrush and juniper near it.

Behind him the Buick's other door opened and shut, and the heavy footsteps of Sylvester Adams crunched on the gravel. Adams came abreast of him. The beefy man removed the cigarette from his lips.

"Do you want me to go with you?" he asked.

"What for? Don't you think I can do it right?"

"Sure you can. You just ain't done it yet."

Wood felt his muscles tense. He looked away from Adams, first toward the highway and the dark desert beyond, then toward the lonely booth. He silently took a deep breath. Then he began walking toward the phone booth. Perhaps because he was thirty-four and in excellent health, normally he gave no thought at all to the process of walking. Tonight he did. He could feel the motion of his leg muscles as he lifted each foot, moved it forward, lowered it, and touched ground.

When he reached the booth, he wanted to look back at Sylvester Adams. He wanted to know how Adams stood while he watched Wood (and he would watch, closely). He wanted to know whether Adams held his arms akimbo, or crossed them over his chest, or stuffed his hands into his back pockets, whether his mouth was closed and his eyes narrowed or his mouth and eyes both smiling. He overcame the temptation to look back. Partly because he knew that he couldn't see Adams over there out of the light, but mostly because he knew that it would please Adams if he did look back. It would reveal again his reluctance. Adams might even believe that he had looked back to gain courage.

Wood stepped into the booth, lifted the receiver, inserted a quarter into the coin slot, and punched the number he had been given.

"Westside Motel."

"Lawrence Williams' room, please."

Wood heard a click, followed by two rings. Then a man answered.

In response to Wood's question, he confirmed that he was Lawrence Williams.

"I understand that you're investigating the disappearance of Franklin Osgood about twelve years ago," said Wood.

"That's right. Who's this?"

"I'm someone who has information that will interest you. You can have it for fifty bucks. Believe me, it'll be worth that."

"Okay," said Williams. "Do you want to come here or to meet someplace?"

"I wanna meet you someplace where I can't be seen talking to you. What happened to Osgood . . . Well, I just don't wanna be seen talking to you. . . . Do you know where Owl Rock is?"

"Down on Sandy Creek, isn't it?"

"Right. There's a stretch of level ground just beneath it. Kids sometimes park there and neck. I'll be there in one hour. Don't forget the fifty."

Wood hung up and walked back to where Adams waited. Adams stood with his feet far apart, his arms folded across his chest, and a big smile on his beefy face. Wood wanted to slug him.

Wood first saw the headlights while they were still a mile away. They peeked off and on from behind the junipers and sagebrush between the vehicle and Owl Rock. The rutted dirt road was a brutal drive any time, and at night it was just plain dangerous. By the time Wood heard the motor above the splashing of Sandy Creek, his clothes were soaked with sweat. When the car came within a hundred yards, Wood stepped over behind a nine foot tall sagebrush.

The car pulled off the road onto the little stretch of rabbitbrush in front of Owl Rock. The engine and headlights went off. The driver's door opened, the lights inside flashed on, and in their illumination Wood could see a man slide out. He was a tall man, probably in his late forties, solidly built and wearing a blue suit. The light went off when he shut the door.

"Are you Williams?" called Wood.

For several seconds no reply came. Then: "Yes. Where are you?"

Wood stepped out from behind the sagebrush and walked toward Williams, who watched him for a moment, then went forward to meet him. Williams held out a bill.

"Here's the fifty," he said. "Now, what can you tell me?"

This immediate getting down to business surprised Wood. He

had anticipated a handshake and some preliminary small talk. Indeed, he had counted on it. He needed time to adjust, time to overcome his remaining reluctance, his fears. He looked down at the fifty dollar bill but made no effort to take it.

"Before I begin, Mr. Williams, I think you'd better know the risk involved. And I mean your risk, not mine."

"Oh?" Williams lowered the bill. "How's that?"

Good, thought Wood. We might be able to scare him off the way we scared off Daniels several years ago. The way *they* scared off Daniels.

Wood sunk his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. He had to be casual, had to convince Williams that his own interest was merely that of an observer.

"As you probably already know," began Wood, "Franklin Osgood was an investigator, sort of like yourself."

"I know that. He was looking into the disappearance of Owen MacMachlan in 1962. But then Osgood himself vanished."

"Right. . . . You see, Mr. Williams, Osgood was prying into some things that it just wasn't healthy to pry into. It still ain't."

Williams tensed. "Are you trying to threaten me? Because if you are, I'll tell you right up front that I don't go for that even a little bit."

"Not 'threaten.' Warn."

"I'm not interested in your warning." Williams raised the bill again. "Only in your information."

Even Wood had not seen Amos Clapp circle around and come up behind Williams. Clapp brought the baseball bat down on Williams' head before either Williams or Wood knew that Clapp was there. It hit with a dull thud. Williams said nothing, just collapsed onto the ground.

For a moment Wood and Clapp stared at each other over their victim. As was the case for Wood, this was Clapp's first time, his initiation as it were. He too had questioned the necessity for it, he too had tried to talk his way out of it. But he too had been convinced by the older men of the absolute duty that he owed to them, to his father and his grandfather, and to their forefathers.

Sylvester Adams was the first to appear from behind the sagebrush that grew around the base of Owl Rock. He carried the sack in which he and Ned Ramsey would stuff Williams' body. Ramsey came up next and helped Adams put the body into the sack. Clapp, his whole body trembling, watched them for a moment and then

turned away. Wood stared up into the sagebrush around the rock base where other men were coming out of hiding.

"You boys did just fine," said Seth Martin.

Martin, Wood, Clapp, and Brent Eliot were seated at a booth in the Spur Cafe. Neither Wood nor Clapp had wanted to come, but Martin had insisted. He said that everyone needed to establish alibis just in case something went wrong.

"I feel awful," said Clapp.

"I know," said Martin. The president of the Cattlemen's Club was a stout man with iron grey hair and cold blue eyes. "I felt the same way when I had to lay the trap for Kenneth Lloyd back in '36. But you get over it. And the chances are slim that you'll have to participate in more than two or three of these things during your whole life. And since you fellows played the most important roles tonight, next time you get to be one of the background boys."

Wood understood what Martin meant by "one of the background boys." That was like Adams and Ramsey loading up the corpse, like Lou Jones driving it to the old well, and like Charlie Price and Virgil Stone preparing the well and dropping in the body.

The old well was hidden by a cluster of sagebrush at the base of Saddle Butte. The only time these men went there was to drop another body down into it. Because the well had been dug into the desert, it could have been several hundred feet deep originally, so space for more bodies would never be a problem. And because of its isolated and desolate location, no one else ever visited that area.

Wood looked around him. None of the nearby booths was occupied, and nobody appeared to be paying any attention to Wood and his companions.

"How many bodies are in that old well?" Wood asked Martin.

Seth Martin slid back in his seat, rubbing his chin as he collected his memories.

"Must be a half dozen by now," volunteered Eliot.

"More than that," said Martin. "Let's see, the first one in, of course, was Earl Garnett in 1891. He was the sheepherder who ignored our deadline."

Wood knew that Martin used "deadline" in its old Western sense: a line past which any sheep would be killed by cattlemen.

Their county in 1891, like other Western counties in other years, had been swept by a range war between the cattle and sheep interests. Cattlemen had believed that no cow could graze where once

a sheep had trod. They had posted boundaries, telling the sheepmen to keep their flocks of woollies on one side of the line. Sheep driven over the line were shot, beaten to death, driven over cliffs, or bunched up to suffocate. Occasionally sheep ranchers and even sheepherders like Earl Garnett also died under cattlemen's guns. Of course, as far as anyone outside their group knew, Garnett had simply vanished.

"Then his brother came around and started asking all sorts of questions and tried to get state authorities to investigate," continued Martin. "He disappeared a couple of years later. Unfortunately, he'd been a rich and influential man, unlike his brother. Earl Garnett's disappearance attracted scant attention even locally, but Norm Garnett's became a big news story all across the state."

"That's what I was told, too," said Eliot before taking another sip of his coffee.

"That caused newspapermen to come here in droves," resumed Martin. "Most didn't get anywhere and soon left. One, George Hill, made some progress. He went into the well a few years after Norm Garnett. Then another journalist, Ward Tallman, went in just before World War I."

"Then there was a pause," put in Eliot.

Martin nodded. "The story of those disappearances had been big news at the time, but they finally passed into history. Our fathers thought that was the end of it. But that created a new problem. News attracted newsmen; history attracted historians. Kenneth Lloyd decided to include our range war in a history he was writing about the state. He's the first one I was involved with. March, 1936. FDR was president and the country was beginning to come out of the worst of the Depression. Jerry, I had your role. I set him up and another fellow came up behind him and broke his neck."

"MacMachlan was my first," recalled Eliot. "He was a private investigator hired in 1962 by Lloyd's daughter. She'd only been seven or eight when her daddy disappeared. I guess she grew up wanting to find out what'd happened to him. Osgood was a private investigator hired by the same woman, and he attempted to find out what happened to Lloyd by finding out what had happened to MacMachlan. I guess he figured the trail was fresher or something."

"And Osgood's family hired Daniels and then Williams," concluded Wood.

They sat silently for several minutes, each man with his own thoughts. Conversation and kitchen sounds came from farther back in the cafe.

"How long does it continue?" asked Wood at last.

"Maybe forever," said Martin. "Each time we do it, we've done something that we've got to cover up."

"But it's a whole new group," protested Wood. "In some cases, we're in the third generation."

"You're covering up for your father's generation, just as he did for your grandfather's," said Eliot. "You're covering up for those of us who did Osgood, and those who did Osgood were covering up for those who did Lloyd, and those who did Lloyd were covering up for the original group."

"That ain't the worst of it," said Martin. "The worst of it is that the whole thing was unnecessary to begin with. It's now known that sheep grazing on a field actually make it a better pasture for cattle."

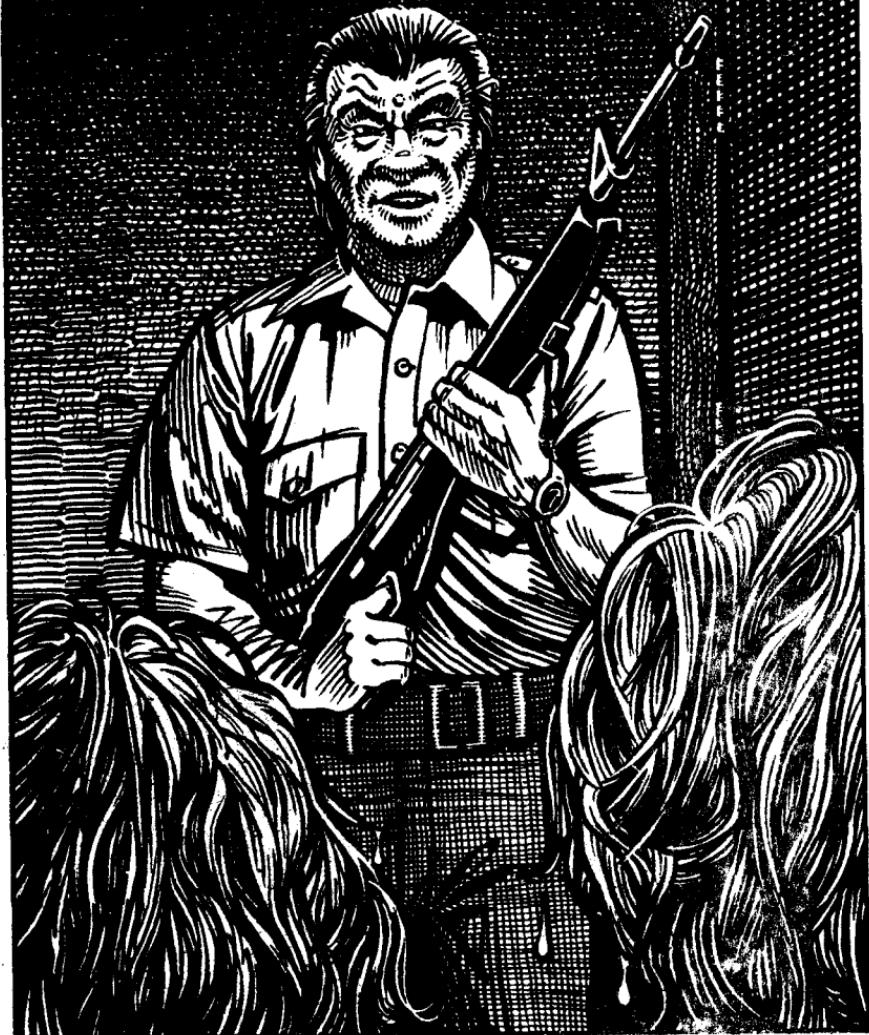
"No," said Wood. "The worst of it is that of all the people in our group, you, Seth, are the only one whose family is still in the ranching business."

Seth Martin laughed. The other men didn't. Not even Eliot. Martin forced himself to stop laughing and took a sip of his coffee.

FICTION

Pinatubo's Wake

by Herb Henson



ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

Coiled and ready to strike, the cobra was just two feet from Wil-lis Barney's face. Still as a stone, terrified, he stared wide-eyed at the snake. The snake glared back at him. Beads of perspiration formed on Barney's forehead, turning to rivulets of sweat that rolled slowly down his cheeks and nose to drip on the dirt inches from his face. He was flat on his stomach in a shallow drainage ditch. It was dusk, the ditch in shadows. But as close as he was, Barney could see every nightmarish detail of the cobra's anatomy. The snake's tongue flicked in and out just as something behind Barney grabbed and shook his foot.

"Move out," she said, impatiently.

"Shut up," he replied, exasperated.

Although the volume of their voices was little more than a whisper, the cobra didn't like the noise. Its head darted toward Barney's face, then retreated. Don't push your luck, the snake's eyes seem to say.

"C'mon, get going," she said, prodding his backside. "They're going to find us."

Damn this woman, he thought. She's arrogant; she's devious; she's dangerous. Later, he would put her in her place. Now he had to deal with

the snake, then with the people who were after them with assault rifles. But he was angry. He couldn't push her out of his thoughts altogether for it was *she* who had gotten him into this fix. He had been minding his own business—

“Iwant you to find a missing navy wife," Sandra Drewett had told him a day earlier. She was a Naval Investigative Service (NIS) agent from the Subic Bay Naval Base. Brown hair cut short navy style, dressed in blue denim slacks and a green blouse, she had sat on the fender of the navy staff car watching him work.

Barney was shoveling ash away from the entrance to his tavern, Barney's Place. He paused and leaned on the shovel, studying her face. Her expression revealed nothing, but the chill he usually saw in her arctic blue eyes—silently communicating her disapproval of Barney and other expatriate scoundrels—was gone, replaced by a suspicious warmth. You can trust me, her eyes seemed to say to him. I *really* need your help. Still, he was skeptical. "Why should I?" he said.

She didn't answer immediately. Instead, her eyes left his

to look over the desolation that was the village of Saint Peter's Gate. After centuries of sleep, nearby Mount Pinatubo had waked up in a foul mood. It had shaken the earth angrily while blowing its top and spewing thousands of tons of ash and pumice rock over the Philippine island of Luzon. When the mountain's mood had finally mellowed and the ash and stone had stopped falling, much of the central part of Luzon was devastated. A typhoon had then swept across the island to finish the job the mountain had started. Angeles City and Clark Air Force Base, only ten miles from Pinatubo, had been virtually destroyed. Saint Peter's Gate, Olongapo City, and the Subic Bay Naval Base were farther from the volcano and had fared better. Nonetheless, the destruction had been heavy. Roofs had caved in under the weight of the ash and stone; the once beautiful tropical landscape was covered—in some places a foot deep—with snowlike deposits of ash. The villagers had been digging out for days, but progress was slow. "I could help clean this up," she said finally.

"How?" Barney said. A tall man, slender in the best of times, he had become almost gaunt during the hard days since the eruption and the ty-

phoon. He looked even more disheveled than usual because he hadn't washed or shaved for several days. His jeans and shirt, caked with dried gray mud, hung loosely from his bony frame. Barney's first priority, for he was a goodhearted man, had been to help Father Remedius with the children of Saint Peter's Orphanage. Only today had he been able to look to his own property. Several sections of the tavern's corrugated iron roof had collapsed, crushing the pool tables and a vintage jukebox—his most valuable assets. All of the money he had saved before retiring from the navy was invested here, as were the savings of his Filipina friend and business partner, Melinda Velasquez. Melinda had left the village temporarily to see to the needs of relatives who lived near Mount Pinatubo in the town of Botolan. Barney was unsure whether they should even bother to try to rebuild. Rumor was that Clark would be abandoned altogether by the air force. If the navy followed suit and closed down the naval base, then there wouldn't be sailors and marines around any longer. No customers, no business.

"There's a battalion of Seabees working on the base," she said. "Besides repairing

government property, they might be persuaded to help out the civilian communities. I could get Saint Peter's Gate put on top of the list."

Barney frowned. She was putting him on the spot. He was not a man to involve himself willingly in problems that were not his own. But the village needed help, and the Seabees with their heavy equipment and expertise could accomplish more in a few days than the villagers could in weeks. "Tell me more," he said.

"Her name is Hedeliza Smith," Drewett said. "She was manifested on the frigate *Hiram Percy* for evacuation to Cebu. She didn't make it."

"Bound to lose a few," he said, remembering the navy's evacuation of sailors, airmen, women, and children from both Clark and Subic in the midst of the volcano's tantrum. Unable to fly dependents out of the country from Luzon because of the volcanic ash in the air and on the ground—ash that damaged jet aircraft engines when sucked into the intakes—the navy had moved U.S. personnel and their dependents south to the island of Cebu on every available warship. From Cebu, U.S. Air Force C-5 and C-141 transports had flown the evacuees to Guam and eventually on to Travis Air Force Base in Cal-

ifornia. It had been a major effort undertaken on short notice; it had been carried out with professionalism and few mistakes. But there were bound to be a few. "I take it from this woman's name that she's a Filipina," he said. "Maybe she just didn't want to leave."

"That may have been the case," agreed Drewett. "Nonetheless, the woman's husband is worried, and we've been ordered to try to locate her. The husband is a Storekeeper First Class at sea on the *Stanfred*. The ship's captain has requested NIS assistance, and his request has the endorsement of the fleet commander. The admiral and his staff are embarked on the ship."

Barney nodded. And what the admiral wants, the admiral gets, he thought. But then the man was just looking out for the concerns of his men—their wives and children. USS *Stanfred*, a cruiser and the admiral's flagship, was the only U.S. warship with Subic Bay as its official home port. Her crewmen were therefore permitted to have their families at the base.

"Hedeliza is a Philippine national," Drewett said. "She and Petty Officer Smith have only been married a short time. She comes from a little village not

far from Mount Pinatubo named Kapa—something.”

“Kapayapaan?”

“Yes, that’s it. Anyway, Smith thinks she may have been worried about her younger sister who lives in this village, and might have tried to go home instead of following the base commander’s orders to join her assigned group for evacuation. We need someone to go to the village and find out if Hedeliza is there.”

“So why don’t you go yourself or send one of your agents?” Barney asked.

“We have only a skeleton force here right now,” replied Drewett. “Most of our agents—the ones who had their families here in base housing or in Olongapo City—were evacuated at the same time as the others. Besides that, those of us still here have more work to do than we can even begin to handle, what with all the looting and such that’s been going on. I’d like you to go instead. It won’t take much of your time.”

“Why me?” asked Barney.

“You’re an ex-chief petty officer and you speak Tagalog,” she said. “Perfect for the job. Also, remember that you’re in the fleet reserve; I could get you ordered back on temporary active duty if necessary.”

Barney shrugged. Drewett’s threat of having him ordered

back to active duty didn’t have any substance, he guessed. But her offer of getting the Seabees to work in the village had merit. It probably wouldn’t take him more than a day or so to go to the woman’s village, find out if she was there, and then come back to Saint Peter’s Gate. “How soon can you get the Seabees out here?” he asked.

She slid off the car’s fender. “Does that mean you’ll do it?”

“How soon?”

“By the time you get back from Kapa—whatever,” she said.

“All right,” Barney said reluctantly. “I’ll go to Kapayapaan tomorrow morning.”

Barney didn’t move a muscle. Long motionless seconds went by. The cobra had the advantage in close quarters, and it wasn’t going to move and let him pass. Drewett was tugging on his foot again.

“There’s a snake right in front of me,” he snapped, urgency and a trace of panic in his voice.

Drewett let go of his foot. “Okay,” she said. “I hear you, and I’m backing up to give you some room.”

Slowly, watching the snake for signs of an impending strike, Barney slid the front

half of his body backwards toward his knees. This maneuver caused his rear end to rise above the top of the ditch.

"Keep down," warned Drewett from somewhere behind him in the ditch. She was pulling down on the back of his jeans. Her warning was followed almost at once by the jackhammer sound of a burst of automatic rifle rounds fired from somewhere on the hill above, then the slap of bullets plowing into the dirt near the top of the ditch. The impact of the bullets caused a fog of dust and ash to spill down on their heads. Seizing the opportunity to end the confrontation, the snake uncoiled and slithered off down the ditch away from Barney and out of sight. Relieved, he lowered his forehead to the dirt. His body went limp, suddenly drained of the adrenaline that had sustained him. Son of a bitch, he thought. That was close. Drewett was yanking on his foot again. "The snake's gone," he said over his shoulder. "It was a cobra."

"Then move on," she said. "They know where we are now. We can't stay here."

"If you think I'm going to crawl after the snake, you're crazy," he said emphatically. "We'll have to turn around and go the other way."

"We can't," she protested.

"There isn't enough room in this ditch to turn around without exposing ourselves and probably getting shot."

"Crawl backwards then," said Barney. He didn't wait for her to answer. On elbows and knees, he began edging backwards.

"It's a good thing I'm here to keep you alive, Barney," he heard her grumble above the noise of their shuffling limbs.

"Be quiet and keep moving," he said. "If it wasn't for you, I would never have come to Kapayapaan."

He had arrived in Kapayapaan just after noon that day. Kapayapaan—"Serenity" in Tagalog—was anything but. Barney thought the place resembled a war zone, but then so did much of the countryside he had passed through on his way to the village. Roads and bridges all over central Luzon had been washed out by flood-swollen, debris-choked rivers; a thick layer of gray ash covered everything; the sunlight was tainted by a smoky ground-hugging haze. But everywhere the industrious rural Filipinos had returned to their villages and farms and were working to rebuild their homes. Kapayapaan was strangely different.

Some repair work was going on, but not nearly the level of effort Barney had observed in the other villages through which he had passed. Here the workers were old men, moving in slow motion. A few old women were around as well, kneeling beside wellheads, scrubbing clothes in large tin tubs, keeping an eye on children playing in trash-strewn yards. Where are the younger people? Barney thought as he parked his mud-spattered Jeep beside the road near the middle of the village.

As country villages on Luzon went, Kapayapaan was fairly large—larger than Saint Peter's Gate. From the white-washed Catholic church in the center of the village, thatch-roofed cement houses and elevated nipa huts—or what remained of them—squatted beside the road for a city block in both directions. To the west, through a stand of storm-battered coconut palms, Barney could see native boats upended on a mud beach beside a river. East of the village, jungle-carpeted hills rolled toward the inland plains. Far away, barely visible in the haze, the sinister peak of Mount Pinatubo—resembling a giant black chocolate chip—jutted up from the horizon, wisps of smoke belching from its jagged cone.

Barney climbed out of the Jeep and waved to a skin-and-bones old man who sat cross-legged on the porch of a nearby nipa hut. The man, his fingers busily weaving sections of thatch from strips of bamboo, looked up curiously as Barney approached the house. His hands kept moving, continuing with the intricate task of weaving.

Barney introduced himself as a friend of the Smith family from Subic Bay.

"I'm looking for Mrs. Hedeliza Smith who disappeared from the navy base during the mountain's eruption," he explained. "Hedeliza was from this village and has a sister who still lives here."

"Why are you looking for this woman?" the old man asked.

"Her husband is at sea on his ship and he's worried," replied Barney. "Have you seen her?"

The old man shook his head and turned his eyes back to watching his hands work.

"She was probably driving a red Japanese car," Barney said. Drewett had told him the Smiths' car, a late model red Toyota, was missing from the carport adjacent to their apartment on the base.

The old man ignored him.

"Do you know where Hedeliza's sister lives?" asked Barney. "Which house?"

The old man pushed the pieces of thatch aside, dug a small cloth bag from the waistband of his shorts, selected several betel nuts from the bag, stuffed the nuts in his cheek, and pushed the bag back into his shorts. He looked up at Barney with hostile dark eyes. "I do not know this woman," he said, jaws rolling, chewing on the nuts. "Leave me alone."

It was the same with every villager Barney interviewed. Although he was certain at least some of them knew Hedeliza and her sister, no one was willing to say as much. Losing his patience, anxious to accomplish his mission and start home, he decided to try the church. If I can get a straight answer anywhere in this village, he thought, the church ought to be the place.

Next to the church building was a whitewashed cement house Barney guessed was the rectory. He knocked on the screen door.

"I have been watching you," said the balding middle-aged Filipino man who responded to his knock. The man wore a white karate outfit open in the front to reveal a hairless chest and a protruding Buddha stomach. "I am Father De Guzman," he said. "Can I assist you?"

Barney introduced himself.

"Interesting vestments you're wearing, Father," he said, smiling.

The priest grinned. "A hobby," he said, fingering the black sash looped and tied about his substantial waist. "As I said, Mr. Barney, I have been watching you. And, judging from the reaction of my parishioners, I think the questions you ask must be difficult to answer."

"That should not be the case, Father," Barney said. He explained the purpose of his visit to the village. "I'm certain that nearly everyone I've spoken to in Kapayapaan knows Hedeliza Smith, but not one of them will admit to it."

"Come inside, please," the priest said, holding open the screen door. "I believe I can help you."

Inside, Father De Guzman motioned Barney to the worn wicker couch that dominated the spartan living room. For himself he chose a straight-backed wooden chair.

"In addition to the reluctance of the people to talk with strangers," the priest said when he was seated, "you have noticed other unusual things about this village?"

Barney nodded. "The only people around seem to be the very old and the very young."

"You are observant," De Guz-

man said. "The others should be returning to their homes for the evening soon. They are at this moment at the house of Raymond Santos making repairs."

"All of the adults in a village this size?" said Barney. "Mr. Santos must have a big house and a lot of friends."

"A big house, yes," said the priest. "Friends, no. He does, however, have many people in his debt."

"And this is why they work on Mr. Santos' house instead of fixing their own homes?"

Father De Guzman nodded his head. "This is not a village like other villages," he said. "Here, we have a curse."

"What do you mean?" Barney asked.

"You speak Tagalog well," De Guzman said. "So I assume you have been in this country long enough to know of our people's affection for games of chance—gambling."

Barney nodded. "The national pastime," he said.

"Yes," said the priest. "But here, over a period of time, the gambling went beyond being a pastime to become an obsession and a cause of debt that now affects every family in the village. This has happened because of Raymond Santos."

"I don't understand," said Barney.

"You see," De Guzman went on, "several years ago, Santos began hosting cockfights on his property and mah-jongg and card games on the porch of his house. Soon, at least one member of every village family became a regular player.

"Santos was generous, or so it seemed to the players. When they lost, he extended them credit so they could continue to play. Eventually, however, when the debts became large—thousands of pesos—he demanded payment and backed up his demands with threats of violence to be carried out by several hired thugs he brought here from Manila. If the gamblers and their families could not pay—and most of them could not—then they were forced to either give up their property to Santos or else become his employees. Most chose to work for the man rather than give him their land. But their earnings were enough only to pay the interest on their debts. In the attempt to pay off the principal amount of these debts, entire families were forced to work for Santos—to become his slaves, for all practical purposes.

"By this time, Santos' gambling operation had grown to be quite large, drawing players from all over the province. Santos, of course, has become

wealthy from the profits. The worst of it—the curse I spoke of—is that he now owns almost everyone in this village."

"Isn't such an operation illegal?" Barney asked.

"Indeed it is," De Guzman replied. "But the authorities—perhaps because of bribe money paid here and there—look the other way. So now you understand why Kapayapaan's ablebodied people are neglecting their homes and their church to work instead at the home of Raymond Santos. This work is a priority because Santos' gambling operations—and his profits—are at a standstill until the damage to his property has been repaired."

"There is a reason you're telling me this," Barney said. "Is Hedeliza Smith involved in some way?"

The priest nodded. "Perhaps," he said. "You see, Hedeliza's sister, Nanita Esteban, is in trouble with Santos because of a large gambling debt. I have heard that Santos has told Nanita she must work as a hostess at his establishment to repay her gambling debts."

"Where I come from, Father," Barney said, "the term hostess often means prostitute."

"I am afraid that is the case here as well," De Guzman replied. "Santos employs enter-

tainers of all sorts to cater to his customers' desires. Nanita is to begin this work as soon as the repairs in progress have been completed and the gambling resumes."

"A shame," Barney said, "but what has that to do with Hedeliza?"

"Nanita comes to Mass here occasionally," De Guzman said. "I have talked with her, and she has told me that her sister plans to take her away from here so that she will not be forced to work for Santos."

"Has Hedeliza been here, Father?"

"Yes," De Guzman said. "She was here in the village while the ash and stone from the mountain were falling."

"Did she take her sister away?"

"I don't know," said the priest, a worried expression on his face. "I must tell you, Mr. Barney, that I am concerned about both Nanita and Hedeliza. I saw them both, in the red car, drive up the road toward Raymond Santos' house. But I did not see them return. I have since been to Nanita's house in the village. Her neighbors say she has not returned there since that day when she left in the red car with her sister. Nor has she been seen at the Santos house by the villagers working there."

Barney stood up. "Looks like I'll have to visit Mr. Santos to find out what happened to Hedeliza and her sister," he said.

Father De Guzman stood and shook hands with Barney. "Be careful," he said. "And when you return to the village later, you are welcome to spend the night here at the rectory. I have a spare insect net and sleeping mat."

Crawling backwards in the rocky bottom of the ditch was both painful and slow. In the two minutes or so that had elapsed since Barney's faceoff with the snake, he and Drewett had managed to traverse only about thirty yards of ditch in their effort to put distance between themselves and the edge of the jungle. As they crawled, they could hear someone—presumably their armed pursuer—thrashing through the jungle brush on the hillside above them—gaining, getting perilously closer. They had to move faster. The shallow ditch in which they had taken cover wound its circuitous way through the farmer's field, meandering like a mountain stream, both of its ends eventually terminating near the river. Periodically the ditch widened, and in one such spot Barney and Drewett were able to turn

around without exposing themselves to gunfire. Now they were crawling faster, this time with Drewett leading the way.

Barney's knees, elbows, and back ached. He wondered if Drewett hurt as much as he did. If she did, it didn't show. The pace of her crawl was so fast that he was having to hustle to his limits just to keep up. His eyes were straight ahead focused on her bobbing khaki clad bottom, the merits of which he couldn't help but notice. If it were possible to put a decent personality into that body, he thought, he might actually learn to like her. But she was a sailor and Barney didn't like female sailors. They were women trying to do work best left to men.

Drewett stopped crawling. "We're at the end of the ditch," she told Barney. "No more cover."

They heard a shout then, followed by a burst of gunfire coming from behind a stand of bushes and trees near the spot where they had been hidden in the ditch just minutes ago—close!

"C'mon," said Barney. He stood up and pulled Drewett to her feet. Together, muscles cramped from crawling, they ran stiff-legged through the soft furrows of the field to the concealment of the brush and

sword grass beside the river.

If she had told me what she knew in the first place, Barney thought as he ran, this wouldn't be happening.

Raymond Santos' house was on a hill overlooking Kapayapaan. Access was via a dirt road that passed through cultivated fields and beside a stretch of the river before winding and climbing its way through the jungle to the house. Barney had driven up the road in his Jeep, along the way passing a long line of obviously weary villagers coming the other way, straggling down the hill to the village after their day of labor. They had paid him no mind, just walked on with their eyes on the ground. He was reminded of a scene from "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" wherein a seemingly endless column of troll-like people marched down the mountain road from the evil sorcerer's castle while Mickey Mouse, unaware of the danger ahead, went the other way.

The thatch roof of Raymond Santos' cinder block house had apparently collapsed under the weight of the ash and stone deposited there by Mount Pinatubo. New overhead wooden framing was being built, and piles of palm thatch were

stacked beside the house, ready for attachment when the foundation work was completed. Wind-torn screens hung in disarray from a large porch built onto the side of the house. A tall mound of gray ash, apparently shoveled from the house and yard, was piled next to a partially collapsed storage shed at the edge of the jungle behind the house. Parked side by side in the yard near the shed were two vehicles over which a protective tarpaulin had been draped. The tarpaulin, in turn, was covered by a layer of ash and egg-sized pumice stones.

Could one of the cars under that tarp be Hedeliza Smith's Toyota? Barney wondered.

He parked the Jeep beside the covered cars, shut off the engine, and waited a couple of minutes for someone to come out of the house. When no one did, he climbed out of the Jeep and lifted the corner of the tarp. Underneath were a blue Mercedes-Benz and the red Toyota he sought. At that moment, a barrel-bodied man wearing a blue safari suit stepped into view from behind the house. The man's mop of oily black hair was slicked back from a forehead on which sat a fat brown mole positioned squarely between his bushy eyebrows. He was ugly—almost as ugly as the M-16 as-

sault rifle he was pointing at Barney's chest. "What do you want?" he demanded in a gravely voice.

"I'm looking for Hedeliza Smith," Barney said. "The owner of the Toyota under this tarp."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Will Barney, a friend of her husband. You must be Raymond Santos."

"I am," the man acknowledged. He came a few steps closer, inspecting Barney suspiciously. "You are from the U.S. Navy?" When he spoke, long black whiskers, growing from the mole between his eyebrows, twitched like a rat's whiskers.

Barney shook his head. "Why the rifle?" he said.

"Looters," said Santos. "One cannot be too careful these days. I used to have some men here—guards—but they took off for Manila when the mountain exploded." He spat in the dirt. "Cowardly twits—the bunch of them. Good riddance."

"Is Mrs. Smith here?" Barney asked.

Santos shook his head. "The Toyota is here because I bought it from her. She came here wanting money to get out of the country."

"What about Mrs. Smith's sister, Nanita Esteban?" Barney said.

"Nanita left with her sister," Santos replied.

In a side window of the house a curtain fluttered, catching Barney's eye. He looked, but the face in the window had ducked behind the material.

Santos noticed, too. He waved the M-16, motioning toward the Jeep. "I have answered your questions," he said. "Now I want you to get off my property."

"Just a couple more questions, then I'll leave," Barney said. "Mrs. Smith's car is here. How did the women get to Manila, and when was it that they left?"

"I drove them to Manila myself," Santos replied. "It was maybe one week ago—in the middle of the night."

Barney climbed back into the Jeep and started the engine.

"And don't come back here," said Santos.

He stood in the drive watching as Barney turned the Jeep around and started down the road to the village.

Shouted curses—a woman's voice—and more gunshots came from behind the stand of trees and bushes as Barney and Drewett reached the edge of the field and ducked into the foliage beside the river. Their pursuer was catching up; they

had to keep moving. But a quick look around was enough for Barney to know that they were in still more trouble. What had appeared in the twilight to be only brush and sword grass was actually the edge of a nearly impassable swamp stretching along the riverbank in both directions. A few steps in front of his feet, the viscous brown water of the river drifted by, carrying with it an assortment of floating trash.

Drewett stood beside him contemplating their options with distaste. "Some choices," she said. "We wait here and get shot; we wade off into a swamp—" she shuddered at the thought "—or we jump into a moving cesspool that's probably full of snakes and crocodiles. To make matters worse, it'll be dark in just a few minutes. What's it going to be, Barney?"

"The dark part is okay—an advantage for us," he said. "I think the river is our best chance. It'll carry us downstream to the village."

"If we survive," she said.

"Think positively," he said, pulling off his shoes. "You do swim, don't you?"

She nodded, untying her shoelaces.

"Like this," Barney said. He had tied the laces of his shoes

together and slung them around his neck.

She did the same with hers, then looked at him expectantly.

"What are you waiting for?" he said, up to his knees in the swirling water. "Ladies first." He watched with undisguised pleasure as she waded into the filthy river, her nose wrinkled with revulsion. Serves her right, he thought. She should have stayed home and left a man's job to a man.

Barney had driven back down the hill to the village from Raymond Santos' house to find a navy staff car parked beside the church. Father De Guzman and Sandra Drewett were inside the rectory waiting for him. The priest had shed his karate garb and now wore a neat brown cassock. "We were expecting you," he said. "Would you like coffee?"

A dented aluminum coffeepot and several chipped ceramic cups sat on the table by the couch. Barney nodded to De Guzman. "Yes, thanks," he said. Drewett, a self-satisfied smile on her face, sat on the couch. She wore neatly pressed khaki slacks and a pale yellow blouse. "What are you doing here?" he asked her.

"Sit down and I'll explain," she said. Barney sat on the end

of the couch opposite Drewett and accepted a cup of coffee from the priest. "There was more to this trip I sent you on than I could tell you about yesterday," she said.

"I suspected as much," said Barney, sarcasm in his voice. "Do I get to hear about it now?"

Drewett put her cup on the table, leaned back, and crossed her legs. "Hedeliza Smith worked at the base disbursing office as an assistant cashier," she said. "Like almost every other activity on the base, the disbursing office was closed down during the volcano's eruption, and the military and dependent personnel who worked there were evacuated. It all happened in a hurry, and there was a lot of confusion. Most of the office equipment had to be left behind, but pay records were boxed up and taken aboard ship. Currency—both dollars and pesos—was also sacked up and taken to the ship. When the ship was under way, the disbursing officer and her clerks went to work balancing their records against the cash they had brought aboard. They discovered that a substantial amount of money was missing." She paused, picked up her coffee cup, took a sip, and put the cup back on the table. "There's little doubt that Hedeliza took the money."

"So why did you involve me?" Barney asked. "Stolen government money makes for a priority NIS case."

Drewett nodded, shifting her position to sit poised on the edge of the couch. "True," she said. "What I told you about being short-handed was also true, however. And it was very important for us to avoid spooking Hedeliza so far into hiding that we'd never find her. She's no doubt aware that the navy will figure out some payroll money is missing. She probably thinks that the loss will be attributed to a mistake made during the confusion of the evacuation and that it won't be traced to her. In fact, she planned it that way."

Barney gave her a quizzical look.

"Hedeliza's a pretty smart cookie," Drewett went on. "She covered the cash withdrawals—the ones that ended up under her skirt—by making false entries in a large number of pay records—showing payments of just a few hundred dollars each—and forging the signatures of the sailors who supposedly were paid the money. But that was just an interim measure because she never expected anyone to see those records. During the preparations for the evacuation, she personally boxed up all the records she had falsified and

put them in the stack of stuff that was to be burned. What she didn't know was that every box in that stack was later opened and the contents checked before they were tossed in the fire. A sharp-eyed navy clerk knew active pay records when he saw them and put them aside. Subsequently the records went to the ship. You know the rest."

"You still haven't explained why you got me involved," Barney said. "Why didn't you just come to Kapayapaan yourself to look for the woman?"

"Because Hedeliza might recognize me or any of the other agents still working on the base," Drewett replied. "We're a small detachment even when we're at full strength. And all of us had spent time in the office where Hedeliza worked just a few weeks before Mount Pinatubo did its thing. We were there working on a different investigation."

"So why are you here now?" Barney asked. He was mad. He wasn't on active duty in the navy, and Drewett had no right to involve him—knowingly or otherwise—in an official investigation, especially if she knew she was going to come to the village herself.

"You were the front man," Drewett said. "Hedeliza wouldn't recognize you. You

don't look much like an active duty sailor. You're too, well, disreputable looking." She laughed. "You really ought to shave more often, Barney. With that stubble of whiskers you always seem to have, you look like—what's his name? The Palestinian terrorist."

"Arafat," said Barney. He wasn't amused by her comparison.

"Well, maybe not quite so—" she smothered her smile and resumed her usual serious expression. "Anyway, now I need to know what you've learned," she said. "Father De Guzman has already told me everything—except whatever you found out by talking to Raymond Santos."

Barney frowned. He ought to tell her to go to hell and return immediately to Saint Peter's Gate. But there was Father De Guzman to consider. The priest had been sitting quietly in his straight-backed chair, listening to their conversation, his brow furrowed.

As if reading his mind, De Guzman said: "This matter concerns at least one of my parishioners. Any help you can provide, Mr. Barney, I will appreciate."

Barney sighed. He told them about his conversation with Raymond Santos and what he had observed.

"So Hedeliza's car is there," said Drewett. She stood and began pacing about the small room. "Do you think he was telling the truth about Hedeliza and Nanita? Could it have been one of them you saw in the window of the house?"

Barney shrugged.

"Who else lives at the house?" Drewett asked De Guzman.

The priest shook his head. "Santos had a wife," he replied, "but he threw her out long ago. Then there were the guards Santos hired, but he told Mr. Barney they left Kapayapaan during the mountain's eruption. Who else? I'm afraid I don't know."

"The time the women supposedly left—about a week ago—jibes with the facts," Drewett said, absently twisting a lock of her hair. "But something doesn't fit." She stopped pacing and turned to Father De Guzman. "If Santos is telling the truth about driving the two women to Manila in the middle of the night," she said, "would anyone in the village have seen or heard his car?"

The priest shook his head. "Probably not," he said. "It is not unusual for there to be vehicles on the road through the village at night."

Barney interrupted. "What seems fishy to me," he said, "is

that the sister—Nanita—apparently left the village without as much as going by her house to pick up some of her things. I've never known a woman who would do that."

"Good point, Barney," said Drewett. "It could be, though, that her belongings were already packed up and in the back of Hedeliza's car."

"One other thing," Barney said. "If Santos is as concerned about looters as he led me to believe, it seems unlikely that he would have left his place unguarded—probably for most of the night—while he drove the women to the city."

Drewett nodded. "Unless there are other people at the house, people he didn't tell you about." She began pacing again. "It seems to me that there are two possibilities here," she said. "Number one is that Santos is telling the truth. Hedeliza paid off Nanita's gambling debts, sold her car to Santos, and the two women went to Manila, intending to get out of the country. Number two is that the two women are prisoners at Santos' house. They may even have been murdered. From what I've heard of Raymond Santos, I think he's the type of man who might do something like that if he found out about all the money Hedeliza had with her."

"God forbid," said De Guzman.

"I guess you have a mystery to solve, Agent Drewett," said Barney.

"We have a mystery to solve, Barney," Drewett said. "I still need your help."

Barney groaned.

Like sewer rats, Barney and Drewett clung side by side to a length of floating timber—once part of a building—as the current carried them lazily down the river toward the village. The air reeked of rotting vegetation. The banks of the river, barely visible in the evening gloom, were a tangle of swamp brush and contorted mangrove tree roots. The rhythmic swish of the water coursing along the river's banks provided background for the concert of mysterious nighttime sounds coming to life in the jungle all around them. Then, like a sudden discordant note, a splash about thirty yards away near the south bank of the river caught their attention.

"Is that what I think it is?" Drewett asked Barney. Her voice was hushed, anxious. She raised an arm out of the water and pointed a dripping finger. "In the water—see it?"

Barney saw an elongated black shadow on the water's

surface. The shadow—whatever it was—appeared to be moving laterally across the flow of the current, headed in their direction. His stomach tightened. A floating log, he thought, or—"Relax," he told Drewett, his tone reassuring. "I know what you're thinking, but I don't believe there are any crocs on Luzon—too far north." He hoped not, anyway.

"You sure?" she said doubtfully, watching his face.

"Pretty sure," he replied.

Drewett shivered and resumed her watch on the approaching shadow.

Barney guessed they had been in the water drifting downstream for less than ten minutes. They should be abreast of the village soon. But if that is a croc in the water with us, he thought, then we aren't going to make it to the village. They would have to swim for shore—and soon—hoping they could find a place on the swampy bank where they could get out of the water fast.

"Look, it's turning," said Drewett.

As Barney watched, the shadow changed course to run downstream parallel to their position, only a few yards away.

"We're in big trouble," Drewett said tremulously. "That's a

crocodile sizing us up for its next meal. I'm sure of it."

"You may be right," Barney agreed reluctantly. Their eyes met, and he saw the fear that gripped her. She's about to panic, he thought. Do something, Barney. Shifting his position on the floating timber, he folded his arms protectively around her, molding his body to hers. Let her gather up her nerve for a few seconds, he thought. Then we've got to swim for it. He could feel her body trembling—or was it his?

"I'm really okay," she whispered. "You don't need to protect me."

"You looked scared."

"I can take care of myself."

"We're going to have to swim for it."

"I'm ready when you are."

Barney was impressed with her courage, if not her judgment. It was her fault they were in this mess, but then she was just doing her job. Would he—a man—have done anything differently if he had been the one in charge?

They had left Kapaya-paan and driven up the road toward Raymond Santos' property in Barney's Jeep. About fifty yards from the house, Barney pulled off the road and parked behind an outcropping of rock and

brush. "What now?" he said, setting the handbrake.

"We've got about an hour of daylight left," Drewett said, climbing out of the Jeep. Slung around her neck was a pair of government-issue binoculars she had taken from the trunk of the staff car before they left the village. "What I want to do is get as close to the house as we can without being spotted."

Barney gave her a mock salute. "Follow me," he said.

A few minutes later they were crouched in the jungle near the spot where the road ended and the clearing around Santos' house began. Barney saw no one about; both cars, still under the canvas tarpaulin, were parked near the house as they had been earlier that afternoon.

Drewett scanned the building with her binoculars. "I know one thing already," she said. "Santos was lying. The women never left here."

"How do you know that?" Barney asked.

Drewett lowered the binoculars. "By the layer of ash and stone on the tarp over the cars," she said. "That tarp and those cars haven't been moved since Pinatubo settled down. If Santos drove Hedeliza and Nanita to Manila, he didn't do it in either of those cars."

"Makes sense," Barney ac-

knowledged. "How did I miss that? It was right in front of me."

"You're not a trained observer," she said smugly. "Now we need to get closer to the house while we still have some light. I want to get a look into the side windows."

Drewett in the lead, they crept through the jungle along the edge of the clearing, working their way toward the house, making as little noise as possible.

Suddenly Drewett fell, sprawling face first in a bramble bush. As she fell, a loud metallic rattle filled the air. "Damn," she said, rolling over on her back, wincing as sharp thorns dug into her flesh. A length of heavy twine was twisted around her feet. Every time she moved, whatever was rattling rattled more.

"Hold still," Barney said. He knelt beside her and began cutting the tangled twine from her feet with his pocketknife. "We're going to have to get out of here," he told her, tossing the twine aside. "Unless Santos is deaf, he heard the racket and he knows someone's out here. C'mon, get up. Let's go back to the Jeep."

"What did I trip on?" Drewett said, tearing herself free of the clinging bush, struggling to her feet. Her face and arms were

scratched and her blouse was torn; the binoculars had disappeared somewhere in the bush.

"If you follow that string I just cut off your feet," Barney said, "you'll find a bunch of tin cans with pebbles in them tied to it every couple of yards. It's an alarm system. Simple but effective. There are probably tripwires strung up in the jungle all around the house."

Bam-bam-bam—the staccato report of fire from an automatic rifle slammed through the jungle; Barney and Drewett dropped face down in the dirt as bullets tore into the foliage around them.

"They're over here," a female voice shouted in Tagalog.

"I've found their Jeep," shouted a man's voice, farther away—Santos.

"Let's get out of here," said Barney, jumping up, pulling Drewett up with him by the back of her blouse. Grabbing her hand, he dragged her along behind him as he pushed deeper into the jungle, down the steep hillside, crashing through the brush, running as fast as possible. The automatic rifle fired again, and bullets spat through the trees over their heads, spurring them on.

They were both thoroughly winded when they reached the bottom of the hill and broke out of the jungle at the edge of a

plowed field. They stopped for a moment to rest.

"I need just a couple of seconds to catch my breath," Barney rasped, his chest heaving. Judging from the noise on the jungle hillside above and behind them, he knew they couldn't pause for long.

"We can take cover over there," Drewett gasped, pointing to a natural drainage ditch that wound through the middle of the field.

Moments later they were on their stomachs in the ditch and Barney was staring wide-eyed at the biggest and maddest cobra he had ever seen.

Barney and Drewett's run—from the jungle near Raymond Santos' house to where they now sat on the root of a mangrove tree beside the river putting on their shoes—had taken less than twenty minutes. During that short period they had been shot at, menaced by a cobra, and narrowly escaped the jaws of a crocodile—a beast that might have existed only in their imaginations. The village of Kapayapaan, seen from their vantage point on the tree as a sprinkling of lights in the dark jungle, was only a few hundred yards away.

"Thanks for trying to protect me from the crocodile," Drewett said, pushing wet hair away

from her face. "It wasn't necessary, but thanks just the same."

Barney shrugged. "The shadow we saw was probably just a log," he said, tying his shoelaces. "If it makes you feel any better, I admit that I was scared, too."

"I didn't say that I was scared, Barney. I just said thanks for doing what you did when you thought I was."

Barney shook his head in disbelief. Couldn't she admit for once that she was a woman with the same weaknesses as any other woman—or man, for that matter? "Let's get moving," he said, disgusted. He didn't offer her any help in getting out of the tree. To hell with her, he thought, starting through the jungle toward the village.

It took them only a few minutes to walk the remaining distance to Kapayapaan. At the church rectory, Barney tapped on the screen door. They were admitted almost immediately by a strangely silent Father De Guzman. Moments later, Barney understood the reason for the priest's odd reception.

"You should have listened to me when I told you to stay away from my property," said Raymond Santos. He had been standing out of sight behind

the door cradling the M-16 rifle he now trained on Barney, Drewett, and the priest.

"You had no right to shoot at us," Barney said.

"A man has a duty to protect his home from intruders," said Santos, leering at Drewett. Her clothes, still wet from the river, clung provocatively to her figure. "You, madam, must have come here in the navy car parked outside. Therefore, I must conclude that you are from the navy—probably police—come here after the Smith woman, the same as this man." He motioned toward Barney with the butt end of the rifle.

"I'm an agent of the U.S. Naval Investigative Service," Drewett said authoritatively. "Where is Hedeliza Smith? We already know that you lied to Mr. Barney about taking her and her sister to Manila."

"Why are you so interested in this insignificant Filipina?" said Santos, the whiskers on the mole between his brows twitching.

"I'll ask the questions," said Drewett. "And I'd advise you to answer them truthfully. Hedeliza Smith stole money from the navy, and you know it. You can make things better for yourself by putting down that rifle and telling me where to find her and the stolen money."

She's a gutsy one, Barney

thought. Or else she's stupid. Either way, if she could just hold Santos' attention for a few more seconds, he could jump him and get the rifle. Barney had no illusions about Santos' intentions. The man had been no more than a petty criminal until he got involved in the theft of U.S. Navy payroll money—and there was no doubt in his mind that Santos was involved up to his ears. Bribes paid to local officials couldn't protect him now. He would have to kill them all. He had probably already killed Hedeliza and Nanita. But then who was the woman who had shot at them near Santos' house and chased them through the jungle?

"Is that so," said Santos to Drewett, a sneer on his repulsive mug. He waved the M-16's muzzle in her face. "Hold your tongue, woman."

Barney caught Father De Guzman's eye and nodded his head slightly toward Santos. The priest, standing on the opposite side of Drewett, remained motionless, but his eyes told Barney that he understood what had to be done.

Hands on her hips, Drewett didn't back off. Her blue eyes blazed angrily at Santos. "You're pushing this thing too far, Santos," she said. "What are you going to do now? Are

you going to murder three people—two Americans and a priest?"

Barney's eyeballs rolled. That's exactly what he plans to do, he thought.

They heard the car coming then, its engine racing as it sped into the village, brakes squealing and gravel flying as it slid to a stop outside the rectory. Moments later, a young Filipina burst through the screen door, tears in her eyes, panic on her face. "Help me, please," she said, tearfully. "My sister has been bitten on the leg by a cobra."

"Nanita!" said Father De Guzman. He embraced the woman briefly, then the two of them turned and started toward the door.

"Wait," said Santos. "There is nothing to be done. Leave the woman to die."

"Nonsense," said De Guzman, stopping and turning to face Santos. "If we apply a tourniquet to the woman's leg, then drive her to the medical clinic in San Felipe, there is an antidote she can be given that may save her. This is a God-given human life, sir. We must do what we can to help her."

"I said to leave her," shouted Santos. He moved to the door and stood blocking the priest's way.

As Barney watched, Father

De Guzman underwent a bizarre transformation. In a matter of seconds the man changed from a peaceful parish priest to a warrior poised to do battle. His squat body swelled with hidden muscles as he dropped into a crouch, bulldog legs braced in a karate fighter's stance, rigid arms and knife-edged hands extended threateningly toward Santos. "Aaaahhh-hah!" De Guzman shouted, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

Santos—and everyone else in the room—froze, staring amazed at the transfigured priest. Santos' rifle remained pointed at Barney and Drewett.

"Aaaahhh-hah!" shouted De Guzman again, bouncing on his feet, hopping a pace closer to Santos.

Santos' mouth curled and his lips quivered; the disgusting black whiskers on his mole danced; his eyes darted from De Guzman to his other captives, then back again to the apparently deranged priest. Finally, his eyes locked on De Guzman's wild glare. "Aaaahhh-hah yourself," he shouted, whirling to shove the muzzle of his rifle toward De Guzman's face.

It was the opening Barney had been waiting for. He leapt for Santos' back. But he wasn't fast enough. The last thing he remembered was the rifle butt

swinging towards him, then his head exploding in a rush of pain.

When Barney regained consciousness, he was in a hospital, sunlight streaming in the windows by his bed. He recognized the place immediately, for he had been there before—the Subic Bay Naval Base Sick Bay. Agent Sandra Drewett was dozing, her head cradled on a white hospital pillow, in a green leatherette lounge chair next to the bed. She had changed clothes since he saw her last—to clean white slacks and a red blouse. Her hair was mussed by the pillow, soft brown curls spilling over a face drawn with fatigue. She was snoring.

"Hey!" he said.

Drewett stirred, opened her eyes, yawned, and stretched. "It's about time you woke up," she said. "I've got better things to do than sit here watching you sleep."

Barney was feeling the bandage that was wrapped around his head.

"You have a concussion," she said. "Are you interested in knowing what happened after Santos brained you with the rifle butt?"

Barney nodded, wincing from the sudden pain.

"Father De Guzman was impressive," she said, perched now on the edge of the chair. "You succeeded in distracting Santos just long enough for De Guzman to get his hands on the man and take the rifle away. And then—well, let's just say the good father practiced his moves a bit. Did you know he has a black belt in karate?"

"Yeah," Barney said, holding his head with both hands. "Can you explain to me what was going on?"

"Well, let me just summarize it for you," she said. "Santos and Hedeliza are both in the custody of the Olongapo City Police. Hedeliza's in the hospital with a guard keeping an eye on her while she recovers from the snakebite she got while she was chasing us with a rifle—probably from the same snake you ran into in the ditch."

"Good judge of character, that snake," Barney mumbled. "Bit her instead of me. So the two of them were in on the payroll theft together?"

"Not at first," Drewett explained. "Hedeliza went to Kapayapaan intending to pay off her sister's gambling debt with some of the money she stole from the navy. She planned to take Nanita with her and get out of the country. Unfortunately for her, she wasn't very

smart about concealing the money. Santos saw it—Hedeliza had it hidden in a box in the back of her car—and he got her to tell him how she came to have it. He then convinced her that she'd never make it out of the country without getting caught, especially with Nanita along. Nanita didn't even have a passport. Santos then offered Hedeliza a partnership in his business. He told her that with his know-how and her money they could expand the operation, open gambling houses all over the island and become fabulously rich. Hedeliza's husband and the navy wouldn't look for her for long. They would just assume after a while that she and Nanita were among the many casualties in the wake of the Mount Pinatubo disaster. In the meantime Santos said he would hide the two of them at his place until the heat was off.

"Hedeliza went for it. She and Nanita stayed out of sight during the day—while the villagers were doing the repair work—in the part of the house that wasn't damaged. Santos had been expecting someone to come looking for Hedeliza, so he wasn't surprised when you showed up. But he didn't peg you as anyone official, and he didn't get alarmed until he heard about me showing up in the village in

the navy staff car."

"How did he know you were there?" asked Barney.

"He had an informant in the village—an old man he paid a few pesos a week to sit on his porch and watch for trouble."

"What about Nanita? What was her part in all this?"

"Nanita just wanted her debt paid so she wouldn't have to work for Santos," Drewett said. "She didn't want anything to do with the rest of the conspiracy. But Santos and Hedeliza kept her a virtual prisoner in the house, figuring they could get her to come around eventually. Nanita's first chance to escape came when both Hedeliza and Santos took out after us. Actually what happened was that Hedeliza came after us with the rifle while Santos drove to town in the Mercedes. He knew we would try to get back to the village—to my car. When he got to the village, his informant told him that we had both been talking with the priest. So Santos hid his car behind the church, took Father De Guzman prisoner at gunpoint, and then just waited in the rectory until we got there."

"And Nanita?"

"When the shooting started, she ran after her sister, hoping to catch up and stop her before she killed us. But Hedeliza's part of the chase ended when

she tangled with the snake. Nanita arrived on the scene a few minutes later, helped her sister get back up the hill to the house, loaded her into the Toyota, and drove into the village to find help. You know the rest."

"Father De Guzman must be pleased," Barney said. "His village is now rid of its curse — Santos"

"He is," said Drewett. "He and the rest of Kapayapaan's citizens are so grateful that they've invited both of us back to the village for a fiesta in our honor—after the mess from the volcano has been cleaned up."

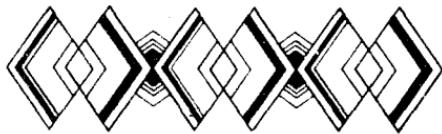
"Speaking of cleaning up messes—"

"Your partner, Melinda, is back in Saint Peter's Gate," Drewett said. "She's busy organizing cleanup projects all over the village. The Seabees will be out there to work this weekend—just as I promised you." She stood up. "Guess you're going to be okay now, and I need to get back to work."

"Next time you need help with one of your investigations, leave me out of it," Barney said, rubbing his head.

"Sure," said Drewett. But her eyes said she was lying.

FICTION



The Perfect Solution

by Barbara Kennedy



ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

From the day that Flora Ozkaptan was paired with newcomer Phil Hunter on the golf course at Bayhaven, everyone knew they'd get married. They had so much in common: a love of the game and a fondness for scotch, mutual childlessness, mutual low-fat diets, mutual wealth. Flora had inherited a substantial fortune from her most recent husband, and Phil from his only wife.

Both of them were goodlooking. In their sixties, they looked twenty years younger. Phil worked out at the Bayhaven gym, and Flora was three years into her second facelift. Inside at the clubhouse, or outside under the Florida sun, they were inseparable.

Four months after they met, the happy couple sent out invitations to their wedding at the Episcopal church, followed by a reception at the Bayhaven Club. The word quickly spread that the reception was to be a sit-down dinner for four hundred people, after which the newlyweds would fly to Switzerland for their Christmas-New Year honeymoon. That was Flora's doing, everybody murmured; Phil was known to be tight with his money. The invited guests began to throw luncheons for the bride, and mammoth cocktail parties for

the bride and her groom.

Flora had lived well both before and since her last husband's death, in a lakefront house almost large enough to be called a mansion. It was Norma Pudnut's first big sale when Bayhaven opened five years earlier. Brand new in real estate, with lackluster sales until then, Norma made her change of luck a turning point by concentrating most of her efforts on the luxury compound a few miles south of Palm Beach on Florida's east coast. She knew every builder and every floorplan, worked evenings, weekends, and holidays, and invited her satisfied customers to an annual cocktail party at one of the local country clubs. Through them, she had an inside track on who was getting ready to sell. The people who didn't like her called her a hustler. Norma shrugged it off. You had to hustle when you found yourself a widow at thirty-two, with two children to support. If her mother hadn't moved in with her to take care of the kids, she'd never have been able to do it.

She knew all about the Ozkaptan-Hunter affair, not only from the contacts she'd established at Bayhaven but also from Flora, with whom she'd maintained a casual friend-

ship. It was no surprise to be invited to the wedding. She was surprised, though, when she was summoned to Flora's house to talk about selling it. They certainly weren't going to move into Phil's golfside condominium, and there was no residence in the whole of Bayhaven that matched Flora's, in its own little crescent on a rise of ground with a spectacular view of the Atlantic Ocean.

Norma arrived five minutes early, an attractive woman with short dark hair, in a sensible suit. Flora's house was in the style of a French chateau. The landscaped grounds were immaculate, the pool made into a grotto with giant boulders and a fountain. If Flora was serious about selling it, Norma mused, she ought to clear enough on her commission to pay off her mortgage, and if she could sell Flora and Phil another place, that would be her kids' annual tuition at their private school.

The maid let her in and showed her to the long glassed-in sunporch overlooking the sea. Flora had hunted all over the South for authentic old wicker furniture, which she had then had reconditioned at fantastic expense. Phil, trim and colonial looking in khaki, drinking scotch on the rocks, took his feet off a wicker ham-

per that served as a coffee table and got right to the point.

"This house is just too damn big for two people," he cried, ignoring the fact that one person had been living in it very comfortably for over two years. "All this wasted space to heat and air condition! There's no need for it at our time of life."

So that was it. He didn't want his cost of living to go up.

"I live all over my house," Flora countered. "But it is a lot of upkeep," she added with a sigh, "and after we're married, we'll have better things to do than worry about a house." She looked gorgeous, in a green silk jumpsuit that matched her eyes, which she flashed at Phil when she mentioned having better things to do.

"You do want to stay in Bayhaven, though?" Norma asked.

"Oh, yes!" they answered together, and Flora added, "We like the security." The whole area was surrounded on three sides by a wall, illuminated at night, and on the fourth side by the ocean. There were two men around the clock in the guardhouse at the entrance.

"She wants one of the three bedroom, three bath condos," Phil said. "I don't think we need that much room, but," with a wry twist of his mouth and his mustache, "anything her little heart desires."

"It has to be high up, oceanfront." Flora gazed out at the ocean, sighed, and sipped her scotch. "I can't give up my view," she said.

Norma, drinking Perrier water with a twist so as to remain clearheaded, said, "The only three bedroom, three bath I have is ground floor, at the back. The Grangers', pots of money but he has Alzheimer's and she wants to move back to Cincinnati with the children and grandchildren. They're a real close family."

"I can't give up my ocean," Flora declared, and Phil demanded, "What have you got oceanfront?"

"Not much," Norma confessed. "There's a studio on one, that's not big enough or high enough—hey!" She beamed. "I have the perfect solution. Two two bedroom, two baths on the top floor, side by side. Tear down the common wall between the dining rooms, and you'll have real elegance."

"With two living rooms I could keep most of my antiques," Flora said.

"You start knocking down walls and you're in trouble," Phil snapped. "And it'll run way over cost, always does."

In addition to being close with his money, he was stubborn. On that point, Flora matched him. Incredibly, con-

sidering how much both of them appreciated what they had in each other, a huge argument developed. It ended with Phil stalking out, shouting over his shoulder that Flora could call him when she came to her senses, and her shouting back that he'd better not hold his breath waiting.

They'd make up the next day, Norma thought as she drove home after comforting Flora. Even when four days went by without a call from the once-happy couple, she was still optimistic. The Bayhaven residents agreed with her. Flora and Phil were strung out from the excitement of their hectic courtship and Flora's elaborate wedding preparations, they weren't spring chickens, you had to expect some ructions even in a perfect match. So went the ruminations along the grapevine.

A week passed, and another. Pre-wedding parties had to be canceled. Flora played golf with her women friends, and Phil with the men. If their foursomes passed on the golf course, the star-crossed lovers made a big play of ignoring each other. Then Phil flaunted the rule that barred employees from club functions by taking Crystal Chalmers to the Halloween dance. She was Bayhaven's director of recreation,

blonde and blue-eyed, twenty-seven, divorced. Not a dummy, though. Norma, on good terms with all the Bayhaven staff, knew that it took an innovative mind to harmonize the energies of seven hundred control-seeking adults.

Never in her life had Flora been one-upped. Her pride and her pain demanded, at the very least, getting even. She sent out cards announcing tersely that the event planned for December seventeenth would not take place, and took up tennis. The pro was Greg Warner, tanned, goodlooking, thirty-three. Suddenly he was everywhere with Flora, including at dances at the club. If Phil could break the rules, so could she.

The rumor was that Crystal was holding out for marriage before she'd move in with Phil. On the weekend after New Year's Eve they disappeared, and returned a week later with snapshots from Jamaica and a simple gold ring on Crystal's significant finger. She resigned from her job and moved her things into Phil's golf villa. A week later Norma ran into her at the upscale supermarket favored by Bayhavenites.

"Phil's going to put the villa on the market," Crystal said after Norma expressed congratulations and felicitations. "We

can't turn around without running into each other."

"Let me know when you're ready," Norma said. "What are you looking for?"

"I think a three bedroom, two bath condo would be nice," Crystal said.

There'd be one on the market soon, Chris and Jim Widener's. They said they thought they'd be happier living in an ordinary residential neighborhood; Norma's private analysis was that they'd discovered that the maintenance fee on top of their mortgage left them with too little discretionary income. She also thought that she'd believe Phil Hunter would spring for a three hundred and fifty thousand dollar condo for his young bride when it happened, but just in case it did, she said, "I'm listing one next week, give me a call."

That week Flora announced her engagement to Greg. No penny-pinching elopement for her; the gala wedding she'd canceled with Phil was on again, complete with the Episcopal bishop and four hundred guests. Among the uninvited were the Hunters, who went on a cruise that weekend.

The newlyweds flew to Europe on the Concorde and flew back on it a month later. Flora came home haggard, and snapped at Greg for the oil his

Trans-Am had dripped onto her garage floor. At the same time everyone noticed how short-tempered Phil Hunter was, especially with his lovely bride. The honeymoons were over; the participants, or at least half of them, were beginning to realize what damned fools they'd been. You could tell by the way they eyed each other on the golf course, where Flora had started to play again.

As a nonresident, Norma couldn't belong to the Bayhaven club, but she was allowed to take her clients there for lunch. Seated in the dining room one fine spring day, she saw the Hunters and the Warners come in together. They all waved, and Norma introduced her clients, a couple from Nebraska yearning to wear shorts every day. Flora and Greg and Crystal and Phil were seated at a window table, overlooking the ocean. Scotch was delivered to the senior members of the group; Greg had a single glass of wine, and Crystal drank iced tea. The conversation flowed, but only between Flora and Phil; their respective spouses looked aggrieved as they muttered to each other.

The two couples became a foursome. The drinks flowed. Flora and Phil acted as if they were still engaged. Crystal took golf lessons in minuscule

tennis dresses, for which her husband rebuked her loudly and publicly. Greg, out of work now, scowled as he ran Flora's errands. The residents reported hearing loud voices coming from the abodes of both sets of newlyweds.

It was Flora's desire that year to roam the mountains in search of the perfect place to build a summer home. Norma stopped at her house one morning in June. The garage door was up, and Greg's Trans-Am was gone. She didn't like to drop in when he was there. Flora's carping at him became embarrassing.

They sat on the sunporch with cups of coffee. Norma recounted the latest gossip she'd heard on her rounds, except that which concerned the Hunters and the Warners, which meant that she hadn't much to report. At least she made Flora laugh. But the set of her mouth was pensive, and she looked as if she wasn't sleeping well.

"I guess you'll be leaving soon," Norma said.

Flora nodded. "I can't stand the humidity here in the summer."

"Where are you going?"

"North Carolina. We've leased a place in Highlands, then we'll drive around, look at

lots." She put down her coffee cup. "The Hunters are coming with us," she said.

"Phil and Crystal?" Norma, usually in control of her expression if not of her emotions, felt shock stretch her face. "For the whole summer?" she blurted.

"Why not? It's no fun with just the two of you. You drive each other crazy."

"Are you sharing living quarters?"

Flora nodded. "It's a two story house. We'll travel in my car, ship most of the luggage."

"I guess you can always rent another car when you get there," Norma said.

"They can do what they like," Flora shrugged. Norma was quite sure that she meant Crystal and Greg, not Crystal and Phil. Flora sighed. "We were so stupid," she said. "We had it made, Phil and I, and we really loused it up. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"Divorce?"

"I'd do it in a minute, just pay Greg off. Money's not that important. But Phil's afraid Crystal would take him for everything he has."

"I thought she signed a prenuptial agreement." Phil made no secret of it, had boasted that he'd made it a condition of the marriage.

"She'd get some sharp lawyer and go into court in a little

black dress with a lace collar, crying all over the place. You know how judges fall for that stuff. And, of course, she'd say that Phil and I are lovers."

If she had been a trusted friend, Norma could have asked, "Are you?" But she was the real estate lady, and so she merely shook her head in sympathy.

"I wouldn't care," Flora said. "In fact, the thought of a beautiful young blonde accusing me of adultery with her husband, at my age, is a real pickup." For a moment, a ghost of her old sense of humor played over her face. It was gone in a second, replaced by the shadow of gloom. "But you know Phil, he'd never be able to stand the publicity. And he gets apoplectic at the thought of her getting one dollar, let alone half of everything."

"He might not have much choice," Norma said. "I mean, she might decide to divorce him."

"I don't think so," Flora said. "She's pretty shrewd. She wants to be the injured party. We've even tried throwing her and Greg at each other so they'd have an affair, but all they do is sit around pouting when the four of us are together."

"Phil could live another thirty years," Norma said.

"There's not enough money in the world to compensate for that, when you're not happy. If I were he, I'd work out something with her right now."

"So would I, in a minute," Flora said, "but not Phil. I wish—" She stopped.

"What do you wish?"

Flora shook her head. "I mustn't say it. It's wicked."

It was Norma's policy to receive all the news she could get but to be discreet about what she disseminated. There was no need to be the first with the juiciest. She could maintain her good standing, and the good will of her clients, by dropping smaller offerings into the public well.

And so she told no one of her conversation with Flora and let the news of the joint vacation, in one house and one car, be told to her again and again as it spread like wildfire along the Bayhaven grapevine. The possibility of a double divorce was discussed and rejected, for the reasons Flora had elucidated. Everyone knew about the prenuptial, and Phil's aversion to parting with his money.

"Phil just better hold his horses," Tommy Caspar observed at the club's twofer one Friday night. "Beautiful little girl like that, what the hell's he want with Flora anyway?"

"Maybe a little class," his wife snapped.

"I'm on Crystal's side," Alice Knorr said. "He's the one going after another woman. In those circumstances I believe in taking him for all you can get." She looked her husband straight in his eye, which had a tendency to rove when any reasonably attractive woman hove into its perspective.

"Flora would pay Greg off just to get rid of him," said a woman sometimes thought to be Flora's best friend. "I happen to know that marriage is a disaster."

"All the same," said Fern Alben, the second wife of old Herb, "it's not the same as staying married and inheriting. Even with a prenuptial, the spouse can usually claim a third if they've been married any length of time. And if he's been sick and she's nursed him, she can get a lot more."

The uproar provoked by that assertion drove the original subject out of everybody's mind, particularly out of Herb Alben's visiting daughter's.

Crystal let it be known that she'd rather stay at the beach than go to the mountains, where, she said, it rained all the time. Greg, who hummed a lot behind tight lips since Flora made him stop smoking, looked

grimmer than ever as he drove his wife's car to the Cadillac dealer to be serviced for the journey.

They left early one sultry morning in July. Norma happened to drive into Bayhaven as they drove out. Greg was at the wheel of the Cadillac, with Crystal beside him, and Flora and Phil in the back seat. It was like the king and queen going off on a trip with their chauffeur and lady's maid.

Less than a week later, the news came that Crystal and Greg were dead, killed when Flora's Cadillac plunged off a mountain in North Carolina. Norma heard about it from one of the residents, Rosa Giannini, a new widow in the process of exchanging her house for a condo.

"Ned and Gloria Maas spend the summers in Brevard," Rosa said, "and Gloria read it in the paper there, called me right away. They took a turn too fast, went through the guard rail, hit rocks all the way down. They were awful banged up, the police had to get Flora and Phil to identify them. Gloria read me the whole thing from the paper."

"It doesn't sound right," Norma said. "If it was Flora and Phil out together, I could understand it."

"Gloria called me back this morning, said it came out they were both over the alcohol limit."

"It just doesn't sound right," Norma insisted. "It's Flora and Phil who love their scotch. Crystal and Greg are—were—health nuts. I wonder—my God, I hope not!"

She was afraid to admit her suspicions even to herself. They'd have to get Crystal and Greg drunk and into the car, and push it over the edge. People you knew didn't do such things, especially respectable people like Flora and Phil. He was a cold fish, but Flora had a heart. She'd never go along with it.

But it was obvious that they realized they'd made a terrible mistake, and Phil, at least, was unwilling to pay the price of correcting it. Even so, to think they'd resort to making themselves criminals and living with the nightmare of committing a murder—it just wasn't possible!

Norma considered herself a pretty good judge of character. She'd know, when Flora and Phil came back, just from talking to them. She'd know then if they'd murdered their young spouses.

They didn't come back. Norma received instructions

from a local law firm to sell their respective residences. When she asked for their addresses and telephone numbers, she was told that Mrs. Warner and Mr. Hunter were in seclusion, and desired no contact with former acquaintances. She was given a post office box number in San Diego for necessary correspondence, and a lawyer's address to which she was to Express Mail sales contracts, and told not to reveal either address to anyone.

"Not even the name of the city," the local lawyer warned her. "They absolutely don't want to be bothered."

The Bayhaven residents who'd been friends of the bereaved couple were outraged. Norma's feelings went beyond resentment. She was certain now that there had been foul play. In normal circumstances, Flora and Phil would have come home, wallowed briefly in their grief and their friends' attention, married each other, and lived happily ever after.

The circumstances weren't normal. Flora and Phil were afraid they might give themselves away if they came back. They were holed up in California, probably married, certainly together. A new set of friends wouldn't ask questions about former spouses they'd never known. Flora and Phil

could start out fresh, as if it had always been the two of them. They needn't even say they were newly married, or where they'd lived. They could let people think they'd just retired and moved to sunny California from Illinois, after thirty years of happy marriage.

It wasn't right! Norma couldn't ignore her sense of outrage. Eliminating the people causing problems in your life was the ultimate crime, not the perfect solution.

Common sense told her not to go off the deep end with a call to the authorities in North Carolina. Even you have been known to be wrong sometimes, Norma, she chided herself, and hoped this was one of the times. But she had to know, and she'd know if she faced them.

She'd already had her vacation, but there was a real estate convention scheduled in Los Angeles in October, and the realtor she worked for placed great faith in conventions. Norma made her reservation and bided her time. Phil's golf villa sold fast; surprisingly, he'd listed it at an attractive price. That in itself was suspicious. The sale of Flora's house was going to take a little longer. For what it was, the price was eminently reasonable, but the recession and the bank failures had made big

mortgages hard to come by.

October came. In Los Angeles, Norma endured two all-day workshops and a five hour banquet. Then she drove her rented car to San Diego and checked into a motel.

The next morning she set out to locate the post office box. She'd used it a few times to forward notes of condolence handed to her by friends of Flora and Phil, and to ask what Phil wanted done with his belongings inside the villa after she sold it. Her typewritten unsigned reply instructed her to donate everything to Goodwill. He must be feeling generous in his bereavement, she thought.

The zip code turned out to be a stretch of oceanfront lined with upscale residential areas similar to Bayhaven. The post office was Spanish-tiled, as were most of the buildings in the attractive downtown area. She stationed herself across from it, in the parking lot of the public library.

The day dragged. But she was buoyed by her certainty that Flora and Phil would be edgy murderers, checking their mail every day. She bought

sandwiches and a thermos of iced tea, and consumed the lot before, at ten past three, her patience was rewarded.

A racy little Mercedes zoomed into the post office parking lot, top down. The redhead who stepped out on the passenger side was youthful and shapely, her companion tanned and virile.

It couldn't be! But it was. She'd been wrong. This wasn't murder, it was plain old fraud. There'd been no plying with scotch to get the victims drunk, no dragging them into the front seat of the Cadillac and sending it off the cliff. There'd just been an innovative mind at work when the police brought the news of the accident. Why fight in the courts for your inheritance when you could simply assume ownership of it? Why not just redder your hair and grey his, in case anyone from the old life described the bereaved wife and husband, and become the wealthy Mrs. Warner and Mr. Hunter?

Because it wasn't Flora and Phil walking into the post office hand in hand. It was Crystal and Greg.

Fingerprinting a Killer

by Malcolm McClintick

The house was one of those newly restored Victorian things, sort of like in San Francisco, except that it wasn't San Francisco, much to Allen Ross's chagrin; it was Indianapolis, in a downtown area called Lockerbie Square. Yuppies and other upwardly mobile people came here, bought homes, and lived in modest luxury amid the surrounding rundown warehouses, bars, loan companies, and storefront law offices. They could walk to work, smile knowingly at one another, and pretend to be the cream of a real city.

The dead man lay on his back on the bathroom floor of his Victorian house. His name was Phil Hendrix, single, late thirties, owner of a small nearby loan company called E-Z-Cash Finance. He was heavy, over six feet, dark hair, wearing blue boxer shorts and a blue terrycloth robe. The left side of his neck and face was still covered with the dried remains of shaving cream; the other side was smooth. The stubble of unshaven beard poked through the cream. He looked physi-

cally fit, except for the fact that he was dead.

The blue robe lay open, revealing three ugly bullet wounds: one in the left shoulder, one in the middle of the bulging stomach, and one just to the left of the breastbone.

Allen Ross, of the prosecuting attorney's office, stood in the bathroom pushing his horn-rims up on his nose and looking down at the dead man. He had been sent by his boss to work with the Indianapolis cops on the homicide investigation because the victim had telephoned the prosecutor the day before with information. Ross shook his head. Obviously, the phone call had led to the man's death.

It was nine fifteen on a Tuesday morning in mid-January, dry and frigid outside, temperature hovering in the twenties. The victim's Victorian house was pleasant, maybe even a bit warm, except for here in the bathroom where a small window—too small for anyone to get in or out—was open several inches, letting in the cold.

Shivering, Ross glanced up to

see the city detective in charge of the case standing in the bathroom doorway, Sergeant Sam Vincent, a tall, skinny, fiftyish guy in a brown wool suit and brown overcoat, narrow face, balding on top.

"How's it going?" Vincent wanted to know.

"Not bad." Ross smiled. "You solve it yet, Sam?"

"Oh, sure. I just got out my mail-order detective kit, looked through my magnifying glass, and snapped my fingers." Sam Vincent grinned wryly. "Actually, it *is* pretty much open and shut, ain't it?"

"Sure." Ross glanced at the corpse. "Did you notice he's holding a bar of bath soap in his left hand, Sam?"

Vincent nodded. "Yeah, we ain't exactly dumb in Homicide, whatever you legal eagles think. I noticed the bar of soap."

"He was shaving," Ross pointed out. "Half of his face still has shaving cream and whiskers. He was using shaving cream from a can, not bath soap."

"So? Maybe he liked to wash his hands."

"In the middle of a shave?" Ross asked, then stepped out into the hall so an Indianapolis *Star* photographer could get by. The crime lab people had finished already. Basically they were waiting for the coroner's man to release the body.

"Look," Sam Vincent said, "it's simple. He's been shot three times, see? Doc says one got him right in the heart, one in the gut, one in the shoulder. Big caliber, probably at least a .38. Three exit wounds. Three slugs in the wall behind him, where they came out. No shells on the floor, so probably it was a revolver. Rear door of the house was kicked in, ripped the lock right out of the wood. Bathroom door's been kicked in, somebody's foot right under the doorknob. It was locked, but just one of those flimsy things with a push button in the knob. So, here's the picture. Killer broke in the back door and came here. Hendrix is shaving with the door locked. Killer kicks in the door. Killer lets Hendrix have it three times with a revolver. Hendrix falls on the floor and dies. Killer goes out the back door and makes his getaway. Only thing we don't know is, who the killer was."

"Footprints on the door that was kicked in?" Ross asked.

"Just a faint dirty mark, nothing to go on. Nothing outside—all the walks around here are bone dry. No fingerprints, either."

"I don't understand why Hendrix was gripping that bar of soap," Ross said. "I'll tell you something, though. It was one of four guys."

Sam Vincent smiled vaguely. "Now we're getting someplace. I didn't figure your boys sent you over here just to annoy me and my boys. What four guys?"

"Hendrix telephoned our office yesterday," Ross said. "Hendrix manages the E-Z-Cash Finance Company, just over in the next block. He's got four loan officers working under him. It's a fairly small outfit. Hendrix said yesterday that one of the four had been extorting sex from female clients."

"Huh?"

Ross nodded. "Yeah. Apparently this guy would tell some young attractive female who was in hock up to her ears that he'd take care of some or all of her indebtedness for her, in return for certain, uh, favors."

He saw Vincent frown. "Creep. So, then it is open and shut. Why didn't you tell me this before, Ross? Which guy is it?"

Allen Ross got out a cigarette, then realized he shouldn't smoke on the crime scene and put it back in the pack. "Well, that's the problem," he said. "Hendrix didn't tell us yesterday on the phone which guy it was. We set up a meeting with him for ten o'clock this morning, and he was going to tell us then."

"Damn it. So, you don't have any idea at all?"

"No."

Vincent considered this. Then he turned to one of the uniformed cops. "Hey, Sid? Get a car over to the E-Z-Cash Finance Company and round up all four loan officers. Bring 'em down here. Okay?"

The cop nodded. "Right, sarge."

"Any of 'em not in the office, find 'em and bring 'em anyway," Vincent added.

The cop nodded again and was gone.

Allen Ross thought about the four loan officers and the sex extortion racket and the bar of soap and the three bullets and the kicked-in doors, and went outside onto the front porch to pull his overcoat collar up and smoke his cigarette. The body was taken out in a bag by the coroner's deputies, loaded into the back of a van, and driven away. Three bullet holes. Rear door kicked in, bathroom door kicked in. Ross visualized what had probably happened.

When Allen Ross got up in the morning and shaved, he didn't lock his bathroom door. Why should he? Nobody was coming to blow him away. So why had Hendrix locked his bathroom door? It didn't make sense, unless . . .

Ross pictured Hendrix in there shaving. Then he tossed his cigarette into the frozen yard and reentered the house, immediately fogging up the

lenses of his horn-rims. "Drat," he muttered, took his glasses off, and wiped at the lenses with a handkerchief. When he could see again, he plodded down the hall to the bathroom and looked inside.

The blood was still on the floor where it had flowed from the exit wounds in Hendrix's back. Ross could see the holes in the plaster wall where the three slugs had buried themselves. The small window was still partly open, letting in cold air from an unpaved alley. Ross turned and called to Sam Vincent, who was pacing back and forth in a formal dining room off the hall.

"Hey, Sam?"

The cop stopped pacing and came out into the hall to stand at the open bathroom door.

"Yeah?"

"Was this window open when you guys got here?"

"Sure was. Hendrix must've been a fresh-air nut. But I hope you're not trying to make something of the temperature. He hasn't been dead long enough to make the cold a problem for the time of death determination. Besides which, we've got a neighbor who heard all three shots and called the cops."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Ross said absently. He looked at himself in the shaving mirror and took out a comb, ran it through his thin black hair.

There wasn't a lot left on top now, and he was only forty or so. After forty he'd stopped counting, but it hadn't been that long ago. Still not bad, though, he mused, checking his teeth—nice and straight—and the line of his jaw—no flab yet. But he didn't much like the gray at the temples.

"Admiring yourself?" Vincent asked with a sneer. "You ain't that beautiful."

"It's getting thin on top," Ross said.

Vincent laughed. "I ain't had hair on top in ten years. Welcome to the club."

Ross followed Vincent back into the dining room just as the uniformed cop returned, ushering in four men who frowned or looked worried or, in one case, politely smiled.

"Sergeant Vincent? These are the loan officers."

Ross appraised them as the cop said their names.

"James Neal." A short, thirtiyish, blond guy, tan suit, tan overcoat, polished shoes, pale complexion, pale blue eyes. Frowning hard, indignantly. Pompous, Ross decided. Arrogant.

"This is Tony DeVoss." A big, heavyset, dark-haired guy, black shifting eyes, large beak nose, clean-shaven but with a shadow already appearing in the area of his beard, thick black eyebrows. DeVoss was

also scowling, looking angry, his big heavy fists clenched at his sides.

"Bill McCready." The polite smiler. Ross decided McCready was eager to please. About six feet, late twenties, bland, fair, aviator-styled glasses, flashy sport coat, loud tie. Ross could smell McCready's cologne. There were four guys standing there, but it had to be McCready's.

"And Frank Keller." This was the scared-looking guy. Short, plump, in his twenties, a little stubbly reddish mustache, short red hair, boyish features, dark eyes darting all around. Afraid of—what? Being charged with murder?

Sam Vincent said gruffly, "I'm sorry to drag you gentlemen down here, but your boss, Phil Hendrix, was shot to death earlier this morning. I suppose you've already been informed?"

They all nodded. Tony DeVoss said loudly, "So what? Are you arresting us or something? How come we gotta get pulled down here?"

"We have reason to believe," Vincent said, "that Hendrix was shot by somebody in his office. Which is to say, *your* office. So we'd like to ask you all a few questions."

"That's bull," DeVoss said, scowling harder.

"I don't know anything," Frank Keller stammered, glancing around nervously.

McCready, polite and flashy, just smiled and said nothing. Next to him, Neal remained arrogant and indignant. "This is highly irregular," he said. "We're executives."

Allen Ross hid a smile. Executives. Loan officers. Strange world, he thought. Executives. He was trying to think. Something kept nagging at him. While Sam Vincent started questioning the four executives, Ross decided to go back out on the porch for another smoke, where he could be alone and do some figuring.

It was cold out there; the morning sun seemed weak and ineffectual. Down on the street a small car rumbled past, its tires singing on the dry pavement. Evidently it had just been started—its side and rear windows were all fogged up. Ross had once owned a little Renault that had been hard to keep defrosted in winter.

A uniformed cop came out to join him, shuffling his black shoes and lighting a thin cigar. "How's it going, Allen?"

Ross nodded. "Not bad. The sergeant getting anything yet? A confession?"

The cop grinned. "Naw. He won't, neither. Nothing to go on. Unless one of those birds owns a .38. Too bad we don't actually know which one did it, we could maybe try for a search warrant, look for the gun. But

with four suspects we'd be fishing, I doubt we'd get a warrant. Hell, you're a prosecutor. Am I wrong?"

Allen Ross shook his head. "You're not wrong. It'd be tough."

"Weird case, though," the cop said, puffing at his cigar. "Guy shaves in a locked bathroom, then gets plugged holding onto a bar of soap. I asked my partner, what was Hendrix going to do with that bar of soap? Hit the killer with it? Some weapon. If it was me, I'd at least have gone at him with my razor."

Ross took off his glasses and wiped at them again with his handkerchief. "Darn things keep fogging up when I go inside," he said. "Hendrix must have a humidifier."

The cop nodded. "Yeah. You know, another weird thing. Hendrix had a chip of soap under one of his fingers, the index finger on the other hand. He must've really been hanging on to that soap bar for dear life. Hey, speaking of soap, you know what my wife does with her glasses? You can buy that gunk to spray 'em with, you know, keep 'em from fogging up? But she smears a little soap on the lenses, works just like that gunk you can buy. Maybe you oughta try it."

Ross thought for a time, then smiled at the cop. "Thanks. Maybe I will."

He'd just solved the case.

He went back inside the house and his horn-rims fogged up again. Taking them off and wiping the lenses with his handkerchief, he went down the hall and found Sam Vincent in the dining room with the four suspects. Vincent glanced up.

"Hello," Ross said pleasantly, putting his glasses back on. "Anything yet?"

"Nobody's confessed to shooting Hendrix, if that's what you mean," Vincent replied dryly.

"I'm going to use the bathroom," Ross said. "It's okay, isn't it?"

"That's a crime scene," Vincent said irritably. "Use someplace else, can't you?"

"I'll be out in a minute," Ross told him, and entered the bathroom.

He pushed the door shut. The killer had kicked it in, so it would no longer lock, but it stayed almost closed. Ross went over to the small window and shut it. There was a toilet, a sink and shaving mirror, shelves crammed with the usual stuff — aftershave, soap, toothpaste, toilet paper, Band-aids, good quality towels and washcloths. Hendrix's disposable razor lay on the sink. There was an old fashioned tub with feet, and a white plastic shower curtain.

Ross reached down and turned on the shower, all the way over to HOT, as hard as it would run.

He stepped to the sink and turned the hot water tap full on. Then he stood there, waiting.

The cop's wife had a good idea, Ross thought. He pulled a tissue from a box on the back of the toilet and used it to wipe some soap onto his glasses lenses. As the bathroom gradually filled with steam, the shaving mirror over the sink began fogging over but his glasses remained clear.

Ross stood there for a while, smiling and humming a little tune and looking at himself in the mirror. With all the fog on the glass he couldn't see much. He combed his thinning hair once, then gave up. I'll be bald before I'm fifty, he thought.

After a time he turned off the sink faucet and the shower. Someone rapped hard at the door and Sam Vincent's voice came loudly:

"Ross? What the hell you doing in there?"

"Come in," Ross said, opening the door. "Quickly," he added.

Vincent came in, and Ross shut the door behind him.

"What's going on?" the detective asked. "What the hell you doing in here—taking a bath?"

Ross smiled. "How's it going out there? Figure it out, yet?"

Vincent shook his head, frowning. "No. Geez, why've you got it all steamed up in here. You nuts? Out there, it's

rotten. Not one guy has an alibi. Three of 'em own guns, two of 'em have revolvers. All four of 'em disliked Hendrix for one reason or another. They all four got to the loan office within twenty minutes of the time of the shooting and did paperwork in their own little cubicles. Any one of the four could've sneaked out, walked a block, kicked in the back door, come in and shot Hendrix, and beat it back to the loan company again, maybe tossing the gun in a trash barrel on the way. My men are searching the alleys now. I'm gonna have to start interviewing all their female clients to get any lead at all. This is gonna take forever."

"Maybe not." Ross pointed at the mirror. "There's your murderer," he said.

Vincent stared, blinking in the steam-filled room.

"You do that, Ross?"

"Not me. Hendrix. Before he died."

"How?"

Ross said, "Hendrix is in here shaving. If he steams up the mirror he can't see to shave, so he opens that window. It's cool and airy, the mirror doesn't fog over. Right?"

Vincent nodded.

Ross continued. "The killer kicks in the back door. Hendrix hears it. Hendrix already knows he's going downtown today to talk to us and put the finger on

an extortionist. Maybe the extortionist overheard Hendrix on the phone or found out about it in some way. Hendrix is half-way through shaving. He looks out and sees the killer, the extortionist, coming for him, holding a gun. Hendrix knows he's about to be shot. He locks the bathroom door, but it's a flimsy lock and a flimsy door. He doesn't have a chance. What's he do?"

"You tell me," Vincent said.

"He decides that if he's going to get shot, he'll at least name his killer. The name of the extortionist and killer. He grabs the bar of soap, the one you found in his left hand. He jabs the end of his right index finger against it, getting soap under his fingernail. He writes the killer's name in soap, on the shaving mirror. When the killer breaks in, he won't see it—there's no steam in the room, and it's not really visible on the glass unless you get very close and peer. And probably the killer fired from the doorway and never even saw the mirror.

"The killer kicks in the door and fires. Hendrix goes down, holding the bar of soap. If anybody steams up the room, the mirror will fog over—all except for the soap. The killer's name."

Vincent scratched his head. "That was a long shot, wasn't it? How'd he know anybody'd

bother steaming up the bathroom?"

"I guess he just hoped."

"Maybe now we can get a search warrant and look for the gun," Vincent said. He looked at the mirror again.

In the fog on the glass, a name stood out in large dripping letters.

NEAL.

They left the room. A uniformed cop was watching the four loan officers in the dining room. They were all drinking coffee.

Vincent looked at them. "All right, Mr. Neal," he said. "You're under arrest on suspicion of murder. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

The short blond guy in the tan suit and polished shoes stared at Sergeant Vincent. His pale blue eyes widened. Then the arrogance left, leaving only fear and desperation.

"Like hell," Neal snapped, and bolted for the hall. But of course there were other cops out there, and he didn't get far. When they had subdued him and pulled him back into the dining room, Neal glowered sullenly at Vincent.

"How'd you know? Just tell me that."

Vincent said, "It was Mr. Ross here. He saw the handwriting on the wall. Or rather, on the mirror."

The Alias

by Lawton O'Connor

“If I were to commit a crime,” said Mr. Nelson West over the bridge table that evening, “it would be for money, and only for money. But I would have the good sense to leave most of the money untouched afterwards.”

“Then what is the point,” his wife said, “in stealing it at all?”

“Ah,” West said. “If you steal enough to begin with, you can use just a small portion of the money and still have enough to have made the crime worthwhile. The trouble with these big bank and payroll robberies is the robbers always become greedy afterwards. They’re not content to spend just the used bills. They have to spend the new bills too, and that way they get caught. Greed.” He shook his head.

Mr. George Simpson, proprietor of the Greater Arizona Realty Company, played a low club from the dummy. “I’ve always thought,” he said, “that one of the reasons they get caught is there’s more than one of them in on the robbery. The police catch one, he tells on the others; or they get mad at each other; or whatever.”

“That’s another thing,” West said. “The crime must be executed by one man. Never trust anyone.”

“But one man alone can’t steal a lot of money,” Simpson said. “It takes timing and planning and somebody to drive the car and so on and so forth.”

“True,” West said.

“Well,” Simpson said with a laugh, putting up a trump from his own hand, “all I can say for you, Nelson, is I’m glad you work for me. By your own definition, you’ll never commit a crime.”

If it had not been for Mr. Hathaway, Simpson would have been right about West. Mr. Hathaway just happened. He came along out of the blue at a time when Nelson West, himself new to Arizona, had been working for Simpson’s Greater Arizona Realty Company, as a sales agent, for no more than four months.

Simpson called West into his inner office. “There’s a guy named Hathaway waiting outside. Take the keys to the Ford place out in the desert and see if you can sell it to him.”

"That deserted monstrosity?" West said. "You couldn't give it away."

"This is one nut who just might buy it," Simpson said. "I've been talking to him. He's an eccentric. Wanted to know the name of a good bank out here, and when I told him, he asked me for the name of *another* good bank. He's out here from the East. Rich old guy. No relatives, no ties. Wants to be away by himself."

West shrugged and went outside and met Mr. Hathaway. Then the two of them got into West's car and started east, toward the desert.

"I want to stop at a bank first," Hathaway said. "I'm carrying a lot of money around with me."

"Mr. Simpson said you were interested in relocating here," West said. "It's certainly marvelous country."

"I'm interested in more than one bank," Hathaway said. "Two hundred thousand dollars is too much to put in any one bank."

West swallowed. "Well," he said, "the thing to do is get it into one bank for now. There's one in Mesa that has branches all over the state. So we can stop there, and later—tomorrow or the next day—you can transfer some of it. This way you know it'll be safe. Won't have to carry it around with you."

He drove Hathaway to the bank in Mesa, and while Hathaway was inside, he went down the street to a large sporting goods store and bought some bullets and five one-gallon jugs of muriatic acid, which is commonly used for cleaning and regulating swimming pools. He placed these articles in the trunk of his car and was sitting at the wheel when Mr. Hathaway came out of the bank.

"Now let's see that Ford place."

West nodded, and they drove a good distance into the desert.

"They were very nice at the bank," Hathaway said. "I told them I wouldn't be using the money till they had cleared my cashier's check back east, but that as soon as possible I wanted to transfer some of it to another bank. They said they understood."

"Good," West said. He turned onto a road that was hardly a road at all, leading to a scrubby ridge of hills.

"Nobody around for miles, is there?" Hathaway said.

"You want privacy, here it is."

"I should think you'd be afraid driving this wasteland by yourself."

"We all carry guns in the glove compartment," the real estate agent said. He reached over and opened the glove com-

partment. "See?" He took out the gun and showed it to Hathaway, then drew back a little and shot the other man twice.

The road led among the deserted cave formations on the narrow sides and declivities of the upland. West stopped the car and dragged the body of the dead man to a particularly inverted formation of rock. Then he went back to the car and got the acid, and when he was finished with his work there was no recognizing Mr. Hathaway—not now and not, certainly, at any future date when someone might stumble across Mr. Hathaway. The odds were about a hundred to one that anybody ever would.

Then West took the labels off the acid jugs and burned them, and then smashed the jugs themselves on a plateau of rock nearby. Finally, he replaced the used bullets in the gun, put it back in the glove compartment, and drove home.

Rather than try to get rid of any of the contents of Hathaway's pockets, he took them all home with him. That night, he suggested to his wife that she visit her mother in California, something his wife had been talking of doing for some time. She agreed to leave the following day.

He saw his wife off on the plane the next morning, then

purchased some plain stationery and envelopes at the airport counter and went to a telephone and called Mr. Simpson.

"I think I've got that twenty-four-hour virus," he said. "I'd better not come in till tomorrow."

"Take care of yourself," Simpson said. "How did Hathaway like the Ford place?"

"Sounded interested, believe it or not," West said. "He's going to let us know."

When he had finished with his phone conversation, West drove home and took from his own suit the contents of Hathaway's pockets. There were several items of identification—a New York driver's license, Social Security card, and so forth. There was nothing to indicate that Hathaway had any connections of a personal nature in the East. He must have been telling the truth when he said he had no relatives, no ties.

There was a checkbook from the Mesa bank and a savings book as well, indicating that Hathaway had deposited a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in the checking account and twenty-five thousand in the savings. For a time, West practiced imitating Hathaway's signature. Finally he got it down to his satisfaction.

Then he wrote out a check for three thousand dollars and made

it out to the Greater Arizona Realty Company. He signed Hathaway's name to the check, and on the border of the check wrote "Earnest Money on Ford Property." Then he put the check in an envelope, addressed the envelope to Mr. Simpson at the realty office, and went out and mailed it.

West was at his desk the next morning when Simpson came over with the check.

"That Hathaway's a real nut," Simpson said. "Here's a deposit on the property, but no note with it or anything. Where's he staying?"

"I don't know," West said. "I thought you knew." He shrugged. "Well, at least you've got his money. You'll be hearing from him." He paused. "If his check's any good. Anybody crazy enough to buy that Ford place would do anything."

"Well, suppose I just call the bank and find out if it's good," Simpson said.

"Good idea," West said.

He waited, and in a few minutes Simpson came back. "Good as gold," he said.

"Then we've made a sale," West said happily.

He waited until Simpson had come back from lunch before making the next move. Then he went into Simpson's office and said, "That fellow Hathaway called while you were out to

lunch. He's a nut, all right. Now he's leaving town for a few weeks, but he wanted to make sure we'd hold the house for him."

"So long as we've got his money," Simpson said, "I don't care what he does."

West had not yet, in the time he had lived in Arizona, been anywhere northwest of Phoenix. Now, however, he went to the Glendale branch of the bank in which Hathaway had opened his account. Here he identified himself as Hathaway, producing the bank books on the other branch as proof, and transferred eighty-five thousand dollars to the Glendale branch.

He did not touch any of this money. Instead, over the next two weeks, he drew several checks on the Mesa bank and cashed them at the Glendale bank.

When he had fifty thousand in cash, he stopped. There was still eighty-five thousand in the Glendale bank and sixty-two thousand in the Mesa bank.

At this point, West destroyed all the Hathaway bank books and other credentials. He would spend the money slowly and keep it hidden, never depositing it to his own bank account. For this purpose, he took out a safe deposit box at his own bank, into which he put most of the money.

The Hamburger Mind

by Evelyn Payne

I took the matter up with Rhoda when the meat loaf appeared on my tray that night.

"This is the third time this week that you've served me ground meat in one form or another. I don't care for ground meat," I pointed out, trying to be as pleasant as possible. The memory of that phone call from Nellie still rankled, but I wasn't going to bring that up now.

Rhoda just stood there, her lower lip pushed out mulishly, her black eyes angry. Then she tossed her head, that absurd haystack hairdo of hers waving like a black balloon, and said, "Things are getting more expensive all the time, Tess. You don't realize it since you're not doing the buying. Hamburger is just as nutritious as—"

"I have plenty of money," I interrupted, "and I'm sure Harold gives you enough to run the house without being so parsimonious. Steaks and roasts aren't so easy for me to chew, but I like chicken, turkey, seafood. And no spaghetti. I'm particularly fond of lobster—"

She actually winced, and I remembered hearing how stingy

she had been even as a child, always hoarding her money and begging pennies from visitors; and then she married that no-good husband and had to scrimp and save for years and years. No wonder she thought in terms of hamburger. Her clothes were always neat and clean, but they were obviously old and sometimes darned. The only thing in the world she spent money on was that hairdo of hers. She went to the beauty shop every week and came back with it blacker than ever, teased and shellacked so that no single hair dared stray from its appointed place. It might have been a wig; at any rate, I don't think she ever combed it herself.

"I'll make out some menus, and Maria knows how I like things fixed, so you won't have to bother with anything-except the actual buying," I said, glancing out the window at the side yard. "Oh, and another thing. The garden looks dreadful. Hasn't the gardener been coming lately?"

"Oh, he wanted to raise his prices, so I let him go," she said

casually. "We can't afford that much for a gardener."

"Of course we can," I snapped. "I'll take the matter up with Harold when he comes tomorrow."

She sniffed, the sniff suggesting that I was a gullible old fool and that Harold was probably robbing me blind. She didn't like him, although he was always very polite and nice to her. Perhaps she'd guessed that he had been opposed to my hiring her to run the house when I couldn't get around as well as I used to. But I'd felt sorry for my sister, who had had a mighty thin life, and I expect I'd been a little nostalgic about my only remaining relative (Harold is Tom's nephew, not mine). Of course that was silly because Rhoda is fifteen years younger than I, and I'd been married and gone from home before she even started school.

Well, Harold had been right. Nellie Blair had told me on the phone that morning that Rhoda was going around insinuating that I was getting senile, losing my marbles. Oh, Rhoda hadn't said anything—it had been a matter of head shakes and gestures and pursed lips. I could visualize it—in six months I'd learned how Rhoda operated. She never wasted a word when a gesture or an expression would do.

As for my losing my marbles, it just wasn't so. True, I can't remember as well as I used to, but at eighty-two one has to let some things go, and I'd just as soon forget about the present—it's dull and rather frightening. Much more interesting to remember the past, to filter out the warm, exciting, happy things and hold them close. Since I had pneumonia six months ago I haven't been able to manage the stairs even with my cane, so my days consist mostly of eating, taking the medicine Dr. Stanhope prescribes, reading, and watching TV. Of course I have occasional visitors and phone calls from old friends, and then there's Harold, who comes once a week. I really look forward to that.

I'm very fond of him, and he seems to return the sentiment. He takes care of my affairs and, most important, he still treats me as if I were an interesting person, one he really enjoys visiting with, not just an old nuisance. I gave him power of attorney right after Tom died ten years ago, so I don't have to worry about anything—except these little spells of confusion that come over me now and then. I suppose that's why Rhoda thinks I'm losing my mind. I break out in perspiration first, then everything gets confused and sometimes I fall. I guess I

must say some rather strange things because when I begin to clear up I notice that Rhoda's face is longer and more disapproving than ever—if that's possible—and Maria, who's cooked for me for eighteen years, pats my arm and says tenderly, "*Pobrecita, pobrecita.*" It hasn't happened very often, and otherwise, except for occasional lapses of memory, I'm in pretty good shape. I only use glasses for reading and I can hear as well as ever.

I don't know why Rhoda wants to make out that I'm getting senile. Maybe she thinks that somehow she can get hold of some of my money. I'm a rich woman. Tom made a lot and we never had any children. I'd have liked children, but it didn't happen and, after all, I had Tom, who made up for everything.

Thursday afternoon Harold came as usual. He's always prompt, the dear boy. Of course he's not a boy any more except to someone my age. He's fifty if he's a day; still handsome, but a lot fatter than he used to be and beginning to gray a little at the temples. He's always very carefully dressed, and he smokes far too many cigars, cutting the ends off with a little gold cutter I gave him once for Christmas. I tease him sometimes about not being up to the minute—mod, I think they call

it—and he always laughs and admits that he's a square from way back. "If I have to go barefoot and dirty and wear my hair like a King Charles spaniel, why then I'm content to be out of fashion," he says comfortably.

He climbed the long marble stairs to the second floor and came into my room, puffing a little. He leaned over and kissed my cheek.

"How are you, Aunt Tess? Still as pretty as ever. You look younger than most of my contemporaries," he said flatteringly.

"It's good to see you, Harold. I always look forward to Thursdays," I said, patting his arm.

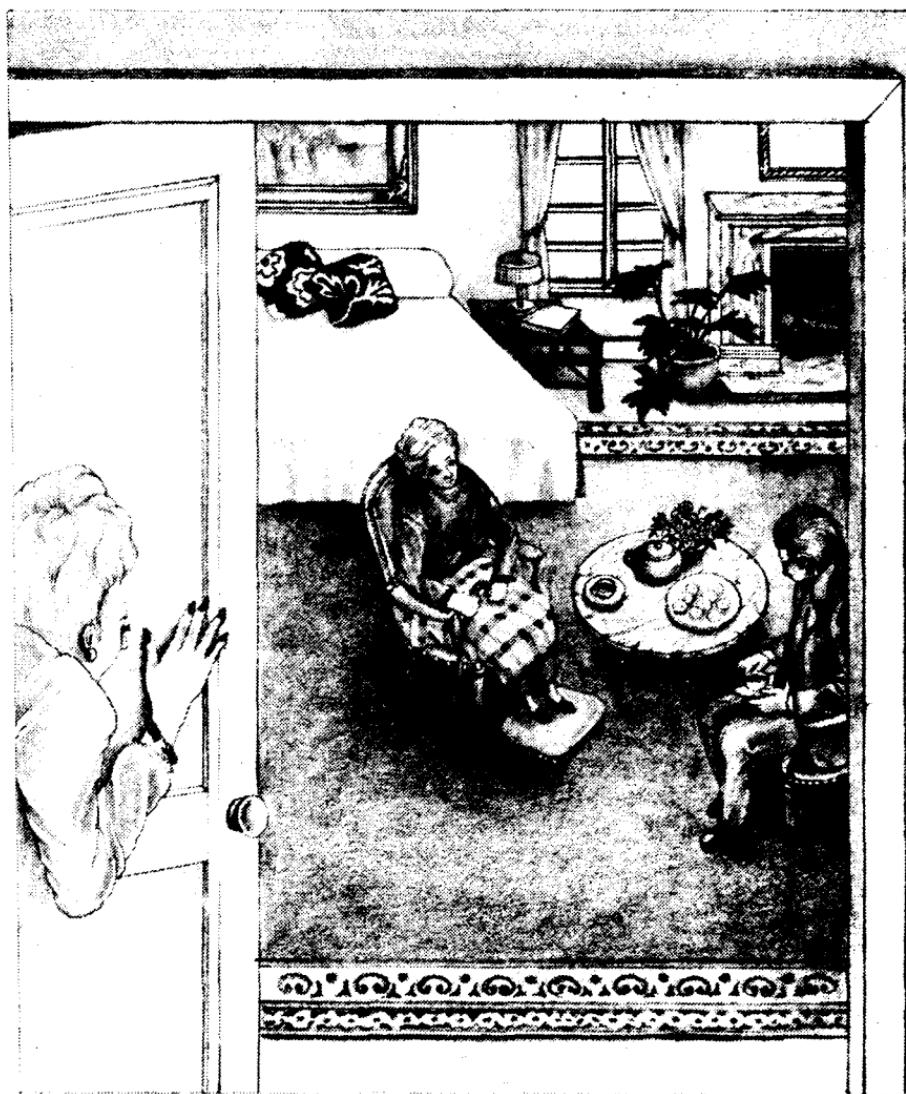
"Are you feeling all right?" he asked, sitting down at the table and putting his briefcase down.

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine."

"Now, you come sit over here by me at the table," he went on, helping me to a chair and seating me.

I like these little attentions from men. That's where I think these women's lib people are wrong. What's the matter with a little politeness between the sexes? It does grease the wheels of communication, I think. Unless, of course, your idea of communication is yelling at each other.

I got out an ashtray from the



"NOW, AUNT TESS, I THOUGHT IT ADVISABLE TO GET RID OF YOUR MERIWELL STOCK AND PUT THE MONEY INTO BONDS."

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories May 1993

table drawer, and he opened the briefcase and took out some papers.

"Now, Aunt Tess, I thought it advisable to get rid of your Merriwell stock and put the money into bonds. There have been some rather disturbing rumors about Merriwell lately and I thought it better to be on the safe side. Oh, I realized a nice profit for you—Tom bought them so long ago," he explained, and then launched into a disquisition on the market in general and Merriwell in particular.

He's nice about pretending that I understand what it's all about, and I listen intently and try to ask a few reasonably intelligent questions. I trust him implicitly, but even if he were robbing me, as Rhoda implies, I wouldn't really care. Most of it is going to be his one of these days, and I know he'll keep me living in the way I prefer as long as possible. He even offered me a home with him and his wife, who's a dear too, right after Tom died, but I wouldn't consent to that. This is my house and I intend to stay here as long as I can.

When he had finished with that and returned the papers to the briefcase, I said, "I want to talk to you about Rhoda. You were right and I was wrong."

He listened attentively while

I told him about the hamburger and the gardener, and then he exclaimed, "But that's absurd. I give her five hundred dollars a month to run this house. I'll talk to her."

I mentioned her implication that he was mishandling my money and he simply laughed, but when I got around to the phone call from Nellie he was furious.

"I'll fire her right now, the b—I'm sorry, Aunt Tess, but—" He stood up and then sat down again. "No, it would be better to send her a letter from the office, enclosing a final check. I suppose she's overhearing all this," he added, glancing at the open door, "but no matter. In the meantime, I'll check on that other woman who applied for the position as housekeeper. She sounded pretty good to me."

"I'll go by your recommendation this time," I said meekly. "But I never thought that a sister of mine—"

"She has a small mind, thinks of nothing but money, a—a hamburger mind, you might say. Because she's a penny-pincher and a cheat herself, she thinks everyone else is, too. But enough of that. I brought those pictures of the grandchildren with me today," he said, pulling some snapshots out of his pocket.

They were darlings, those two little boys. We had a nice

talk about the family and Tom. Harold is practically the only one I can talk to about Tom these days.

Finally he looked at his watch and rose. It was getting close to five and there were shadows coming into the corners. He picked up the ashtray and took it into the bathroom to empty it. When he came out he left the mirrored door ajar.

"Much as I've enjoyed this, Aunt Tess, I have to leave. Have to go home and dress for a charity dinner."

"You do too much of that civic work. You should take it easier," I said, handing him his hat.

"I know, I know. Next year I'm going to take it easier, say no to some of these jobs. In the meantime, though, I have to finish what I started." He bent over and kissed my cheek. "See you next Thursday. First thing tomorrow morning I'll attend to her," he added, jerking his head in the direction of Rhoda's bedroom.

He walked out, and I lay back in my chair and shut my eyes. Visitors do tire me, much as I enjoy them. I wasn't even up to walking over to shut the bathroom door, although I'm usually pretty particular about such things. Then I heard the door of Rhoda's room open—you can't fool me about any of the sounds

of this house, I've lived here too long—but I heard no footsteps, which was odd because she walks loudly, on her heels. I opened my eyes and looked into the mirror on the bathroom door, which reflected the hall. She was tiptoeing toward the stairs. I sat up then and watched. What was she up to now?

Harold had stopped at the top of the staircase and taken out a cigar and the little gold cutter, and then suddenly Rhoda was behind him, pushing at his back with all her strength. His arms flew up, the briefcase dropping and the cigar flying through the air, and he fell. The sound of his scream and the thumping of his body down those stairs will stay in my ears forever. I heard the kitchen door open and Maria come running, screaming too. Then and only then, did Rhoda scream and rush down the stairs.

I got up, took my cane and went out into the hall and looked down. The two women were standing over Harold, and I could see from where I was that his neck was twisted peculiarly, and I knew he was dead. For a moment my heart seemed to stop beating. Then I heard Rhoda go to the phone and begin dialing. I moved closer and peeked over the balustrade. She was directly below me.

"Dr. Stanhope," she was say-

ing, "Harold MacDonald fell down the steps here at the house. I think he's dead. Will you come at once? Oh, I'm going to call the police, but it's Tess I'm worried about. You see, Harold didn't slip. Tess—well, poor thing, I guess she didn't know what she was doing. She gave him—I hate to say this—she pushed him."

It was as though someone had thrown ice water in my face. She was blaming me! For a second or two I could hardly think. I took a step forward and felt something under my foot. Absently, I reached down and picked it up. It was the tip of Harold's cigar. I stood there, holding the thing, and listened to her rattle on.

"Oh, I wasn't anywhere near or I'd have stopped her. I was just opening the door of my room. You'd better be prepared to take care of her. She's dangerous, out of her mind."

Oh, it was all very clear then. With Harold out of the way and me certified as a dangerous lunatic, Rhoda would get herself appointed my guardian and she'd have the money and the house all to herself. This was what she'd been aiming at all these months. I tried to think. I would have to fight, but what was there to fight with? Maria would be on my side, but she hadn't seen it happen. Besides,

her testimony would be disregarded because she was uneducated. Dr. Stanhope would be on my side too, probably, but he only saw me about once a month, and by the time Rhoda had further exaggerated the odd spells I had and had given a graphic description of what she had "seen," I'd be a dead duck. Maybe there were medical tests, but I didn't know, and I couldn't wait for that. I had to do something now. Then suddenly I had an idea—not a very good one, perhaps, but something.

Rhoda was still on the phone, talking to the police this time. I leaned over the balcony and dropped the cigar end down. As I'd hoped, it landed on top of her hair. She didn't seem to notice it, thank goodness. I tiptoed back into my room and lay down on the bed. I didn't weep—I had used up all my tears when Tom died—but there was a vast hurt inside me, and a terrible fear.

Maria came rushing up the stairs. "Oh, señora," she cried, gathering me into her arms and rocking me a little, as one comforts a sick child. "I hear her. And I know it is not true. You do not kill him! *Nunca!*"

"I know, and we'll prove it somehow, Maria," I said, heartened by her love. "There, there's

the doorbell. That will be the doctor. And I hear sirens."

I lay up there waiting. I couldn't hear what was being said, but no doubt Rhoda was giving a full account. Then I heard them coming up the stairs. I got up off the bed and stood, leaning on my cane.

Dr. Stanhope came to my side, anger and sympathy commingled in his expression. He took my pulse, looked at me sharply, and demanded, "Are you all right, Tess?"

I nodded and he said bluntly, "Tess, Rhoda says you pushed Harold down the stairs. Is that true?"

I was equally blunt. "She's lying. She did it herself. Crept up behind him and pushed. That mirror was just that way—I was sitting in that chair and I could see the hall and the top of the steps. I watched her do it."

The chief of police, Oliver Smith, looked doubtful. Rhoda belonged to his church and no doubt he was aware of her little insinuations about my sanity. Finally he said, "Perhaps we'd better call Rhoda up here."

She came up and sat herself down in the chair farthest away from me, trying to look afraid.

I said coldly, "Don't make such a play of being afraid of me, Rhoda. I won't hurt you

even though you've lied about me."

She straightened up. "You did it. I saw you with my own eyes. I've been afraid of you for a long time. You're nuts. A lot of old people get that way."

I turned to the chief. "I'll tell you what happened this afternoon." I went through what I'd told Harold about the hamburger and the gardener, and Maria suddenly interrupted, "She no pay me what the señora did. I only stay because I love the señora and I am afraid of what this *malcriada* do to her."

"Rhoda probably overheard what we said. The door was open," I went on. "And I told Harold that I had had a phone call from Nellie Blair yesterday morning, and she told me that Rhoda was intimating that I was losing my mind."

"I never said a word," Rhoda said indignantly. "Besides, you didn't have a phone call yesterday morning."

"Oh, yes, I did. Nell called while you were in town marketing. Anyway, Harold was furious about that. He got up and started to go fire her right then, but finally he decided to send her a letter of dismissal and a final check from the office in the morning. So she crept up behind him and pushed."

"Why, you lying devil!" she screamed at me. "I wasn't any-

where near when he fell. I was at the door of my room and that's a good twenty feet away."

"Then what's that in your hair?" I asked, moving closer to her. "It looks like the end of a cigar. Harold's cigar. If you were so far away, how did it get into your hair?"

She yelped and started to reach up, but the doctor grabbed her arm. "Look at it, chief. It does look like a cigar end."

Very carefully the chief picked it out of her hair. "Hell, that's what it is, all right."

"It isn't, it can't be," she cried. "I wasn't anywhere near him. You put it there, Tess. You must have."

"I wasn't anywhere near you until five minutes ago when you came into this room. Maria can testify to that," I pointed out coldly.

Maria nodded vigorously. "The señora stay up here. The other one," there was infinite scorn in her voice, "stay downstairs."

"Then it must have flown back and hit my hair," Rhoda insisted desperately.

"The cigar was at the top of the stairs, the cutter a few steps farther down," Oliver Smith said. "That cigar end wouldn't have gone very far. Too light."

"Maybe you'd better check

into her bank account," I went on. "She's been getting two hundred and fifty dollars a month salary and five hundred a month to run the house on. She bought the cheapest food, fired the gardener, reduced Maria's pay. Where did the money go?"

Oliver Smith nodded. "Yeah, that's a point. What'd you do with it, Rhoda?"

She looked around at the doctor, who looked furious, and then at the chief, who looked highly doubtful, and began to whimper. "If you only knew what it is to be poor, really poor, dirt poor. And there she is with all that money and nothing to do but sit around and be waited on. I was only trying to lay up something for my old age. And then Harold was going to fire me and I'd be poor again. I had to kill him, I *had* to."

They've all gone now. The doctor gave me a shot, and the chief apologized for something —perhaps for believing Rhoda's innuendos. Maria has gone to make me a cup of tea, and Harold has gone forever. I'm all alone, and the perspiration is beginning to break out on my forehead. Maybe this will be a good one, one from which I'll never recover.

Slow Motion Murder

by Richard Hardwick

The reason for old Gus Johnson's almost unintelligible call was sitting with his back against the wall inside the boathouse. It was Bernie Hibler, or more correctly, it was the mortal coil which Bernie had shuffled off rather recently and abruptly. He had been hog-tied to a stout wall beam, blindfolded, gagged, and shot squarely in the chest.

"I ain't touched a thing since I found him," Gus vowed to Sheriff Dan Peavy. Gus operated a little bait place on the creek about a quarter of a mile back, at the junction of the main road. "Well, nothin' except when I went in the house to phone you and Deputy Miller."

Dan Peavy nodded, then knelt and touched the body. "Still warm, Pete," he said, glancing up at me. "Ain't been dead too long." His gaze shifted to Gus. "How'd you happen to find him?"

The old fellow didn't seem entirely steady on his feet. One reason was probably the shock of finding the dead man. Another reason could be detected

easily anywhere downwind of him. He was pretty well smashed. "Well, Dan, you know we been havin' this dang northeaster for the better part of a week now, and any fool knows the fishin' ain't any good while a northeaster's blowin'. No reason for anybody to wanna buy bait, so when the weather's like this I allus use the time to kinda catch up on my rest."

"Been catchin' up on your drinkin', too, ain't you, Gus?"

The old man bent his head and nodded seriously. "A mite, I reckon. Not too much, mind you. Everything in moderation. Anyhow, all day I been sort of nappin' off and on. Along about three or four o'clock this afternoon I woke up and had me a little nip, and just as I was layin' back down on my cot, I heard somethin' from down this way toward Hibler's. Sounded like a shotgun goin' off. I figured it was just Bernie blastin' a varmint, and I went on back to sleep."

"You say that was about three or four o'clock?" I asked him. "How do you know?"

"I'm kinda guessin' at that.

You see, I had me another little nip at two. I noticed the clock then. And later on, when that dang car woke me up, it was right at four thirty. So it musta been around three or four when I got up in between."

"What car?" asked Dan.

"Her car! She was tearin' outta Hibler's road like the devil was after her. Didn't even stop when she hit the main road; just laid it over on two wheels and hightailed on toward town. All that racket woulda woke up a dead man."

"You said her? Who're you talking about?"

"I thought I told you! It was Mollie Hammond."

I stared at the old man. "Mollie Hammond?" I couldn't believe it.

Mollie was one of the finest young women in Guale County, and, lately, one of the unluckiest. Barely twenty-five, she was already a widow. Sam Hammond missed a turn a couple of months before on the old post road. The big live oak he tangled with survived. Sam didn't.

It wasn't more than a day after the funeral that Mollie learned Sam had put every dime they had into some kind of deal with Bernie Hibler. Bernie insisted the deal had fizzled, and that his and Sam's money had gone down the drain.

"Afraid it was Mollie, right enough," Gus said. "That got me to wonderin'. From everything I been hearin', I'd say Mollie was about the last person in Guale County to pay a friendly visit to Hibler. I ain't got a phone, so I got in my pickup and drove down here to his place." He nodded toward the body. "That's what I found."

"Whaddya think, Pete?" Dan Peavy asked.

I shrugged. "Same as you do, I suppose. There was plenty of folks said Hibler out and out swindled her. I guess Mollie could have done it, but I'd sure like to hear what she's got to say."

Dan turned to Gus. "You didn't see her drive in here, huh?"

"Nope. She musta come in a lot quieter than she come out. And like I said—"

"I know," Dan nodded tiredly. "You was nippin' and nappin'."

Bernie Hibler wasn't exactly a hermit, but he did treasure his privacy. His place was on a point overlooking Frenchman's Creek in the northwest corner of Guale County, about twenty miles out from the county seat. The boathouse was on a small tidewater, maybe a hundred feet back from Frenchman's Creek, and the same distance

from the house proper. There was a permanent deck inside that ran the length of the little building. A ladder led down to a floating dock in the boat slip, the usual arrangement to accommodate the six foot rise and fall of the tide along our part of the coast.

The boat slip was empty, which prompted Dan to ask Gus if he knew where the boat might be.

"Hibler was havin' some work done on it down at the county marina while the weather was so poor."

Dan walked down the deck, looking around. It was pretty much the same as any other boathouse: coils of rope hung from pegs on the wall; there were a couple of cast nets; a lantern and half a dozen fishing rods of assorted sizes were hanging from nails. A tackle box and a large bait bucket sat side by side at the edge of the deck just above the float, and a rigged fishing rod lay nearby. The line was tangled around the end of the rod, as if it had been dropped or thrown down hurriedly. A couple of yards of line dangled over the edge where the hook, which still had a piece of shrimp on it, had snagged on the planking of the floating dock.

Bernie Hibler had been a particular sort of fisherman,

despite his other drawbacks, and it would have been a tool day you-know-where before he was that careless and messy with his equipment.

"You best have a look in the house, too," Gus said. "The whole place was a real mess when I went in there to phone you boys." The old fisherman scratched his head uncertainly. "Do you reckon I finished doin' my duty, Dan? I'd sure like to get on back to my cabin."

Dan Peavy nodded absently, his puzzled attention being on the dead man. "Yeah, Gus, you run on. Don't stray far, though, in case we need you."

As Gus hobbled out to his pickup truck Dan said to me, "I can't figure this business about tyin' him up, blindfoldin' him, and puttin' that dang gag in his mouth." He gave a gentle twist to the lumpy end of his nose. "You called Doc before we left town, didn't you?"

"Right." I could see the dirt road through the open door. "Fact is, here he comes now."

"Good. Call in and tell Jerry to pick up Mollie Hammond. Tell him to bring her out here."

Guale County's beloved physician and coroner pulled up in the ambulance from the funeral parlor. "County's gettin' to be worse than New York City," he grumbled as he put his black satchel down along-

side the body of Bernie Hibler.
"Murders, gangsters . . ."

"How soon can you give me some idea on the time of death?" Dan asked him.

"What's your hurry?"

"We got a suspect, and the time might be right important."

"I'll narrow it down after the autopsy, but I'll see what I can do to oblige you now."

I used the interval to radio the office and get Deputy Jerry Sealey started on his task, and then I met Dan inside Hibler's house. Gus Johnson had been right: the place was a real mess. Drawers were pulled out and stuff thrown all about, furniture overturned, cabinets open with all the contents on the floor. Whoever had done it either had been looking for something or wanted to make you think he had.

"There's always been tales around that Hibler kept a lot of cash out here, Dan," I said. "Maybe that's what happened."

"Maybe. Still can't figure what he's doin' out there in the boathouse, though. Looks to me like if somebody was goin' to shoot him, he'd have just shot him."

"And speaking of shooting," I said, "I haven't seen a gun anywhere around here. Hibler must have had a shotgun."

"He had one," Dan said. "I've

seen it. A double-barrel twelve gauge. And you're right, it ain't here."

"Reckon the killer must have taken it when he left."

He looked around at me. "Or she?"

We returned to the dock where Doc Stebbins was just closing up his little bag. "Well, it's five after six now. Judgin' from the body temperature, state o' rigor mortis, blood coagulation, he was probably alive at two o'clock, Dan. And he was probably dead by, oh, maybe four. That much spread help you any?"

Dan Peavy sighed. "Helps me, Doc. But I'm afraid it ain't gonna help Mollie Hammond much."

The old medic's eyebrows lifted. "Mollie? What's she got to do with this?"

"That's our suspect," I said, and went on to tell him what Gus had said.

"I'd stake every dime I got on that girl!" Doc exploded. "Why, that girl couldn'ta done this!"

"What makes you say so?"

"Well, she . . . she just couldn'ta!"

"Right now it's just her word against Gus's, of course," I said hopefully. "That is, if she denies being out here."

"What about Gus himself?" Doc suggested. He snapped his fingers. "I'll tell you right now

who to start lookin' for. Fred Trent! That no-good bum has threatened Hibler plenty of times; in front of witnesses, too. He coulda tied him up and shot him, and enjoyed every minute of it."

Dan shook his head. "He's the first one I thought about when I heard somebody had murdered Hibler."

"Right," said Doc. "He's always hated Bernie Hibler, and that judgment Bernie got against him a few months back just might have been the last straw."

The judgment Doc had referred to was five hundred dollars the court had awarded Hibler after Fred Trent, three sheets to the wind, had smacked into Bernie's car in the middle of town and ripped off a fender and a few other things.

"There's only one thing wrong with figuring Trent did this," Dan said. "He's got an ironclad alibi."

"Ironclad, my foot. Ain't no such thing."

"Afraid this time there is." Dan Peavy sighed and scratched his head through his bushy white hair. "*I'm* his alibi. Trent's been workin' for the county all week, and since eight o'clock this morning he's been paintin' the inside of the jail."

By the time Deputy Jerry Sealey arrived with Mollie Hammond, Doc had wound up everything he could do on the scene, and Hibler's body had been taken back to town for the autopsy. Bloodstains and a chalk outline were all that remained to indicate what had happened.

"I didn't know what to tell her, Dan," Jerry said. "I just said you wanted to see her."

"What's all this about, Sheriff Peavy?" Mollie wanted to know. She was a pretty little thing in a tired sort of way, with big brown eyes and a worried look. You couldn't help but wonder what a new hairdo and some makeup would do for her.

"You were out here this afternoon, weren't you, Mollie?" Dan asked.

She frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"We got somebody says he saw you leavin' here in your car about four-thirty. Gus Johnson. He's got a shack up at the junction o' the main road—"

She drew herself up, as if preparing for an ordeal. "I won't deny it, sheriff. I was here."

"Something's happened out here, Mollie," I said. "Something bad."

She nodded, not looking directly at me. "I—I know. Bernie Hibler's been shot. He's dead."

"I reckon you know your legal rights," Dan said. "Maybe you best get a lawyer."

"I didn't do it. That was why I was driving so fast by Gus Johnson's place. I was scared. I found his body out in the boathouse when I got here, and I never saw anything like that before in my life. I—I was scared half to death."

"Kind of unusual you bein' out here, wouldn't you say?" Dan asked her.

"I wouldn't have been here at all if Hibler hadn't phoned me and asked me to come. He called me at about four o'clock. He said he'd decided to settle up with me, and for me to come out here before he changed his mind. At first I thought it was some kind of a joke, that maybe it wasn't Hibler at all. So, when he hung up, I tried to phone him back. He wouldn't answer, and there wasn't anything for me to do but come out and see what it was all about. Well, I knocked on the door, and when nobody came, I walked out here to the boathouse, and I found him, tied up and all that blood."

"He called you at four?" I said.

She nodded. "I remember looking at the clock. It's only about five miles over here from my house, and I left after I tried to call him back. I don't suppose I was here more than five min-

utes or so before I discovered this terrible . . ."

"Was anybody with you when you got this call?"

"No. Since—since Sam was killed, things have been pretty tough for me, and I've been taking in sewing. I was working when he called."

Dan scratched his chin. "I don't reckon I have to tell you how this is gonna look to some folks, Mollie."

"They'll think I killed Hibler? But I didn't, Sheriff Peavy. I swear I didn't. He was dead when I got here."

"How come you didn't call us, Mollie?" Jerry said. "If you'd of called us, then it woulda looked a lot better."

"I was plain scared. I—I knew how it would look, and I guess I figured if nobody knew I was out here I would be better off." She looked at Dan Peavy. "Are—are you going to arrest me?"

"No. Jerry'll take you home, Mollie. But I'm gonna have to ask you to stay there till you hear from me."

Doc Stebbins got a preliminary autopsy report to the sheriff's office at eleven that night. It backed up what he had said before, about the time of death being between two and four in the afternoon. "Couldn't narrow it down any closer than

that," the coroner said. "That close enough to do any good?"

"Reckon it'll have to do."

"There were a couple other things might interest you. There was a bruise on his head; looked like a hard enough blow to knock him out."

"Which could explain how the killer managed to get him all tied up that way," Jerry suggested.

"And," Doc went on, "the angle of the wound was right interesting. The way it looked to me, he was shot right where the body was found sittin' propped against the wall. If that was the case, the killer musta been lying down on the deck when he shot him. The gun, by my figurin', couldn'ta been more'n six or eight inches off the floor."

"There could be another explanation for that," I put in. There was a tide table in the desk drawer, and I pulled it out and ran my finger down the low tide column. "Yeah, look here. The tide was low this afternoon at four forty-two. Now, if Hibler was shot at, say, four o'clock, the tide would have been pretty nearly out. A man standing on the floating dock, maybe just about to get into a boat and leave, would have been able to lay the gun right over the edge of the deck and let loose."

"It makes sense," admitted Jerry.

Dan Peavy nodded skeptically. "There's a lot of screwy angles to this thing. Pete, you and Jerry check up and down Frenchman's Creek first thing in the morning. Maybe you can find somebody that saw something."

"Like what?" asked Jerry.

"Like a boat," Dan snapped. "Specially like a boat somewhere near Hibler's place."

Just then there was the sound of tires squealing up to the curb outside.

A door slammed and old Gus Johnson came wheezing into the office.

"Just remembered something, Dan. Dang if I know how come I was to overlook it before. There was another car come outta Hibler's road today. It was that old rattletrap o' Fred Trent's."

"I was right," boomed Doc Stebbins, slamming his hand down on the desk. "I told you so, didn't I?"

Dan Peavy held up one hand for silence. "What time was this, Gus?"

"Time? Oh, it was about seven thirty this mornin'. Dunno what time he drove into Hibler's. I woke up 'bout quarter past and was havin' a bite o' breakfast when I seen him drive out."

Dan looked over at Doc. "Hibler couldn'ta been dead that long, could he?"

The coroner's jaw knotted and he shook his head. "No, he couldn'ta."

The northeaster was over. At daybreak next morning the sky was clean and blue, with just a zephyr of a breeze from the south. Jerry and I launched the county's boat at the Frenchman's Landing ramp and headed upstream, stopping at every house, shack, fishing camp, everywhere, in fact, that we could find somebody to talk to. We found one other boat on the creek, a crab fisherman tending his traps. The answer was the same everywhere. The only boat seen on the river all day was the crab boat.

Jerry and I both knew him, a fellow by the name of Lewis, from up Cypress City way.

"Who is it you're looking for?" he asked us.

"Ain't exactly sure," Jerry said.

"The guy what murdered Bernie Hibler, whoever it is."

Lewis's eyes popped. "That's the first I heard of any murder. When did it happen?"

"You'll read about it in the paper. We got to get moving," I said.

On the way back to town Jerry said, "What about him,

Pete? What about Lewis? He was out there on Frenchman's Creek yesterday. All he woulda had to do was run his boat into Hibler's place and nobody woulda been the wiser. That business just now coulda been an act."

"And what about any of the others we talked to? Seems to me with traffic as light as it was on the water yesterday, pretty near anybody with a boat could have sneaked over there without being seen."

"Yeah," he mumbled, slouching down in the car seat, "I see whatcha mean."

I knew what was on Jerry's mind, the same thing that was bothering me more with each dead end we hit. The fear that we were going to wind up with Mollie Hammond when everything else had fizzled out.

We had started early, and it was just after nine thirty when we arrived at the office. Fred Trent's car pulled up right in back of us. "You boys just gettin' to work too?" he said somewhat pointedly.

"We been working, Trent," Jerry said. "Which seems to be more'n you been doin'."

"Didn't feel so hot this morning," he said. "Pretty near didn't make it atall."

Dan Peavy met us at the door. "Want a word with you, Trent," he said.

"You fellas caught Bernie's murderer yet?" Trent said.

"You heard about it, huh?"

Trent walked to the desk, nodding. "Yeah. Stopped on the way in this morning to get me a cup o' coffee. Everybody was talkin' about it. Just goes to show, you never know."

"What does that mean?" I asked him.

He looked around at me. "Just that you never know when you see somebody but what it'll be the last time. I seen Bernie myself yesterday morning. Stopped by his place about seven on my way to work. That dang judgment he got against me, I been payin' him twenty-five a month on it." He fumbled in his shirt pocket and dropped a piece of paper on the desk. "There's the receipt he give me. Musta been about the last thing he signed his name to."

Dan Peavy glanced at the paper. We hadn't found any money, either in the house or on the body. Unless Hibler had gone out during the day—and we had no reason to assume he had—there should have been at least twenty-five dollars somewhere out there. It looked now like robbery had been part of it.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Sheriff Peavy?" Trent said.

Dan gave the end of his nose

a little tug. "I reckon you just about covered it, Trent. Now then, how about gettin' busy and finish up this paint job?"

Dan checked with the bank and found out that Hibler carried a checking account with them.

"There's always been talk around that he kept a good bit o' money out there at his house," Dan said. "You set any store in this?"

The banker nodded. "I'm right sure he did. Bernie was always working on some kind of deal, and he liked to have cash to work with."

"You have any idea how much he mighta kept, or where he kept it?"

"As for wherē, your guess is good as mine. As for how much, well, that'd be a plain guess, too. I'd say he had at least two thousand dollars cash all the time. Maybe more, but two thousand would be the absolute minimum."

I was thinking about Mollie Hammond, taking in sewing to make a living. Two thousand would be a lot of money to her; two thousand, along with some revenge.

And what about Gus Johnson? Or the crab fisherman?

"How's the case going?" the banker asked Dan.

"As good as we could expect,"

Dan answered guardedly.

"There's talk around town that the thing's cut and dried. Folks say Mollie Hammond admitted being out there about the time Hibler was shot."

"Like I say, it's goin' about as good as we could hope for."

"It don't look too good for Mollie, does it?" I said to Dan on the way back to the office.

"Not with folks around town startin' to talk against her, it don't. Pete, how come half the folks in this county ain't got enough sense to come in outta the rain, and yet they can all figure out a murder case in five minutes?"

He wasn't really expecting an answer, and of course, he didn't get one.

Doc was at the office when we got there, along with Jerry. The coroner was sitting at Dan's desk.

"There's something else about Hibler's body," he said. "The time of death is the same as I said it was, but the marks where his arms were tied look to me like he might have been tied up for a considerable time before he was shot."

Dan filled a cup at the water cooler. "Got any idea how long?"

"Afraid not. Might have been less than an hour, actually, dependin' on how hard he tried to get loose."

"You know," Dan said, coming over and slouching down on the corner of the desk, "that's the part o' this thing that I just can't figure. If you was gonna shoot a man, how come you'd go to all the trouble o' tying him up that way, and what the devil was the idea of the blindfold and the gag? It just don't make any sense at all."

"It makes plenty of sense to me," Jerry said. "Fact is, I'm kinda surprised none of you figured it out."

"Is that so?" Dan said. "Then how about tellin' us?"

"It's a smoke screen, pure and simple. Same with that business of the fishing rod and the bait bucket and the tackle box. The killer did every bit o' that just to get us to puzzling over it."

"Could be he's right," I said. Up to now, it was the only thing that made any sense.

"All right," said Dan. "Then gettin' back to what you might say is our number one suspect, Mollie Hammond, how come she'd have the time and patience to do all that and then go flying outta there right past old Gus Johnson's shack, makin' enough racket to wake him up, and even admit she was there when we told her she had been seen?"

"That's simple, too," Jerry said. "She ain't the murderer."

But at that point, even Doc Stebbins looked a bit skeptical about it.

I knew it the second Jerry walked into the cafe. There was that telltale gleam in his eye as he took the vacant stool next to mine. "Pete—"

It was late afternoon, and I had plans for that night. I lifted both hands. "Don't say it! You've got an idea?"

Jerry nodded, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing an accompaniment. "Not just an idea, but a *great* idea. Listen, unless it was somebody we ain't even got a lead on, it stands to reason that from the point of motive it coulda been either Mollie or Fred Trent, right?"

"Right, but—"

"But Trent's got an alibi, so that narrows it down to Mollie. All right. Then, from the point o' view of opportunity, it coulda been Mollie or Gus Johnson, right? And if robbery was the motive, it still coulda been Gus. Right?"

"Sure, but—"

"Now me and you both know a sweet girl like Mollie Hammond couldn't have done what was done out there to Hibler, right?"

"I suppose you might say that."

"So, where does that leave us?" he asked, grinning slyly.

I stared at him for several seconds, letting all that deduction sift through the gray matter again. It still came out a little confused.

"I see what you're getting at. You're saying Gus did it, and you're saying that by the process of elimination. But let me remind you of something, Deputy Sealey; in the good old United States, a man's innocent till proven guilty. And you haven't proved a thing."

"Ah ha! You're absolutely correct! But in my book, every criminal has a weak spot. All you have to do is find that weak spot, zero in on it with all you've got, and the next thing you know he's behind bars. And that's where my idea comes in."

I got up and tossed a dime to Thelma for my coffee. "Well, you and your idea sit right here and talk to each other. I've been in on some of your schemes, if you'll recall. I'm not having any tonight, deputy. Fact is, I'm taking Juanita to the drive-in movie, and that's that."

I knew it when I said it. I couldn't get that skinny screwball off my mind.

I sat there staring blankly at the silver screen, Juanita's head on my shoulder, and all I could think about was Jerry.

"What do you suppose he's doing?"

"What'd you say, Pete?" Juanita murmured, digging into the popcorn box.

"Huh? Oh, I guess I was just thinking out loud."

Juanita snuggled up a little closer, and just then a head poked in the window on my side of the car. It was the theater manager. "Deputy Miller, there's a message for you to call the Bon Air Cafe. You can use the phone over at the refreshment stand."

Juanita pulled away. "Is that Thelma calling you?"

"It might be important. I'll be right back."

I made the call and Thelma told me that Jerry had left an envelope there for me. "He knew you'd be at the movie," she said, "and he made me promise to call you at ten thirty. I . . . I really didn't want to, Pete." It was kind of touchy because I dated Thelma quite a bit too. I was on the spot.

"All right," I said. "Open the envelope and read it to me."

"Jerry said nobody was to open it but you."

My blood pressure started rising. As soon as the movie was over Juanita and I had planned to drive out to the beach. The moon was full, and there's nothing like a walk on the beach in the moonlight to . . .

"Pete," Thelma said. "There's

a customer coming in. I gotta go. You'd better come see about this note. It might be real important."

Juanita wasn't any happier about it than I was as I pulled up in front of the Bon Air Cafe. I trotted inside and Thelma handed me the envelope, pausing long enough to throw a disapproving glance at the car, where Juanita was pointedly applying lipstick.

Jerry's note was as short as it was cryptic. It read:

I'm putting the pressure on Gus Johnson's weak spot. Get out to his place as soon as you read this and, if everything works out as planned, you just might get to see a real lawman in action. JS

That did it. I crumpled the note and jammed it into my pocket. As I strode out to the car, I noticed the lights were on in the sheriff's office across the street, and I could see the top of Dan Peavy's head there at his desk. I knew this case had him going, and there might be a chance that Jerry was onto something. I had no choice but to follow through on it.

"Nothing's wrong, is it, Pete?" Juanita asked.

I gripped the windowsill with both hands. "It's like this—"

"We're not going out to the beach?" The dreamy expression she had featured all evening was no longer in evidence. In its place was something more tight-lipped.

"It's the Hibler case."

The door flew open, almost knocking me down. "All right, *Mister Miller! All right!*" She walked rapidly away down the sidewalk, glancing over her shoulder only long enough to say, "Call me sometime, when you're not so busy!"

"Juanita! Let me explain! *Juanita!*"

"The great lover having trouble?" somebody said behind me. I didn't even have to look to know it was Thelma.

I went across the street to the office, fighting a number of conflicting urges, many of which were not at all in keeping with my oath as a deputy to uphold the law.

I uncrumpled Jerry's note and dropped it on Dan Peavy's desk. "I have no idea what it means," I said. "All I know is, he messed up a right promising evening, and whatever this is all about, it better be good."

It was nearly midnight when Dan and I got out to Gus Johnson's bait shack. The moon was high, and the creek and the marshes beyond the cabin were almost as bright as day.

Jerry's car stood beside Gus's

pickup truck, and lights were on inside the shack. As soon as we stopped the car and shut off the engine, we heard the singing. It was coming from the shack, two voices loudly but unsuccessfully trying to harmonize on "Bluetail Fly." The place was a musical disaster area.

"What in the name o'—" Dan growled.

I was beginning to suspect something, but there was little point in venturing a guess in view of the fact we would know in a matter of seconds. The door was open and we stepped inside. There were Gus and Jerry, sitting at a rickety old table, heads thrown back, caterwauling like a pair of hoarse beagles baying at the moon. On the table were two glasses and a quart bottle of Old Sour Mash. Jerry had indeed lashed out at Gus's weakness.

Deputy Sealey spotted us and lurched to his feet, grinning like an idiot. "Look who's here!" He shook Gus, who was still singing. "We got comp'ny. Where's your manners? Get 'em a glass."

"Never mind the glass," said Dan. "I think you just better come on home with us, deputy."

Jerry came around the table, one finger to his lips in an obvious effort to shut Dan up. When he was closer he whispered, "I

done it. I got him t' confess. Now you all just sit tight and I'll get him to do it again."

"Confess?"

Jerry's head rocked up and down. "Just come right out and asked him if he didn't shoot him, and he said he sure did, and was proud of it. Listen. . . ." He faced around and headed back to the table like he was battling a high wind. He picked up the bottle of Old Sourmash and poured the last of it into Gus's glass. "Drink up, ol' pal. Drink up, and tell me once more how you wanted to do it for a long time, and you fin'ly got your scattergun and let him have it. C'mon and tell ol' Jer."

Gus guzzled down the booze and stood up. "Better'n that, ol' pal, I'm gonna show ya. Jush a secon' . . ." He staggered through a door and reappeared carrying a long double-barrelled shotgun. "Lesh go outside. C'mon, everybody. Everybody c'mon with me."

"Dan," I whispered. "Dan, maybe we better take that thing away from him before somebody gets hurt—or killed."

"In a minute," Dan said. "Let's see what he's got in mind. We just mighta underestimated Jerry."

Gus made it through the front door on the second try and with Jerry, Dan, and myself bringing up the rear, he headed

out the narrow dock over the creek. At the end of the dock he stopped. Jerry draped one arm around the old man's shoulders, winked broadly at Dan and me, and said, "Now, ol' buddy, show us how you gunned him down."

Gus nodded, lifted the big gun unsteadily to his shoulder, pointed it out over the marsh, and pulled both triggers.

It sounded like a baby atom bomb going off. But even as the blast faded away, the tremendous recoil of the two shells sent both Gus and Jerry flying backward where they vanished in the creek amid a great splash.

Jerry was the first to surface, coughing and spluttering and yelling, "*You heard him! What'd I tell ya!*"

Gus bobbed up, and I managed to grab his arms before he went down again. Dan had hold of Jerry, and we dragged them both up onto the dock, wet and soggy. "Put the cuffs on him, Dan," Jerry squealed. "You heard him. That's how he shot Bernie Hibler."

Gus wavered back and forth, tilting his head to drain the water out of his right ear. "Bernie?" he said. He started to laugh, and then he draped his arm around Jerry. "Wuz it Bernie you wuz talkin' about, ol' pal? Why dincha shay so? I

didn't shoot ol' *Bernie*. I wuz talkin' about the buck I shot back in '53. Bigges' deer ever come outta Guale County." He started back toward the shack with Jerry. "Shay, ol' pal, reckon you got any more o' that stuff in your car?"

Dan gave Jerry the morning off next day. Even so, when he reported in at two P.M., he was not a well man. His hangover was surpassed only by his desire for silence on the happenings of the previous night. But there are some people who do not go along with the theory of letting sleeping dogs lie. I'm one of them.

"You ever seen a real lawman in action, Jerry?" I asked.

He was at the water cooler, for the fifteenth time. "Pete, how's about knocking it off? I still think he done it. It's just that, well, the old codger's a lot smarter'n I give him credit for being. I'll figure something out yet."

Dan Peavy came in, and right away I could tell something had happened. He wasn't exactly smiling, but there was a look of possible discovery on his weathered face.

"Deputy Sealey, it come to me while I was havin' lunch," he said, clapping his junior deputy on the shoulder. "It might be you cracked this murder case without even knowin' it.

Come on, let's me and you take a little ride and see if I'm right."

"You mean you think Gus done it? How . . ."

"Never mind the questions right now. Pete, you stick here at the office and be sure Fred Trent gets the paintin' done. I might need you to round up the suspects if this pans out."

I'd worked for Dan Peavy long enough to know he had said his last word on the subject, so I did as I was told.

After Dan and Jerry drove away, I busied myself catching up on a little paperwork, and when that was done I phoned Juanita down at the bus station and tried to softsoap her about last night. It took about ten minutes of talk, but I managed to get a date with her for the following Friday night.

Dan called in at about four o'clock, and I could tell by the tone of his voice he was onto something; he'd found a lead.

"Pete, I want you to get Trent and Mollie, and have the lot of 'em out here at Hibler's boat-house at five o'clock sharp. You got that? Five sharp, without fail."

"How come—"

"Don't ask fool questions. Just be here."

Fred Trent was no problem. He was right there, still painting the inside of the jail.

I phoned Mollie's house and told her I'd pick her up in half an hour.

"What for, Pete?" she asked.

I could almost see those big brown eyes, scared, wondering what was going to happen to her. I wanted to say something encouraging, but I couldn't. "Now, you try not to worry, Mollie. Dan Peavy's got some kind of idea about this, and he wants everybody out there."

When I told Fred to put away his paint and brushes and come with me, he put up a bit of a squawk. "What for, Miller? I got work to do here. I ain't got time to go traipsin' all over the county, like some folks I know."

"Look, Trent," I said, beginning to wear a little thin myself. "All I know is we're investigating a murder. Now when the sheriff tells me to bring some folks to where he is, I'm going to bring 'em. One way or another, so move."

He muttered something, and began to clean his brush. Frankly, I was puzzled about Dan, wanting him out there. There didn't seem to be any way he could figure in it, unless he had an accomplice.

Trent and I went by Mollie's house and picked her up, and the three of us drove out to Hibler's. It was a quiet drive. Mollie seemed too scared to carry on any conversation, and

Fred seemed too mad. I would have been glad to talk to either one of them, but it just didn't work out that way.

We were five minutes ahead of the prescribed time, and Dan Peavy met us outside the boathouse as we all got out of the car.

Gus Johnson was sitting in Dan's car.

The sheriff took off his hat. "Mollie. Trent. Glad Pete was able to get you both out here. I think we just might be about to wind this whole thing up."

"Yeah?" said Trent. "Well, unless all of us done it, how come you just didn't get the guilty one out here?"

"Because we ain't . . ." Dan grinned and waved over toward the boathouse. "Like somebody said, one picture's worth a mess o' words. Let's all step inside and see if I can conjure up a picture o' what happened."

Jerry was standing inside on the upper deck, smiling like he knew something, or thought he did. Everything seemed to be about the same as it had been, with the exception that the body was gone, and just the chalk marks and the bloodstain showed where it had been.

Then I saw that something else was different. There was a double-barrelled shotgun lying on the heavy beam at the edge of the dock. It was upside down,

the stock sticking out over the edge, and the barrel pointed squarely at the outline where Hibler's body had been. The barrel was wedged in between the tackle box and the bait bucket.

Dan Peavy turned around to the little group, like a sightseeing guide. His cold gray eyes stopped on Trent.

"That's Hibler's gun, the one that was missin' from the house."

"Where the devil did you find it?" Gus Johnson asked.

"We'll get around to that in a minute," said Dan. "First things first. Now, if it was Mollie who shot him—"

"I swear I didn't do it, Sheriff Peavy," she broke in.

"I said *if*. If it was Mollie, she coulda got rid o' the gun in a thousand places after she left here. And if it was Gus, he coulda done the same thing. Neither one o' them had an alibi for hardly any part of the afternoon. But we found the gun not more'n twenty feet from where the body was, so..."

"I don't understand," Gus said. "I seen you fellas look all around here, and you didn't find no gun."

"We didn't look in the water," said Dan. "That's where the gun was."

He looked over at Jerry.

"About time, ain't it, deputy?"
"Right."

Dan nodded. "Rig it up."

Jerry went around the shotgun, picked up the tip of the fishing rod that had been lying there when the body was found, and slipped the tip inside the trigger guard of the shotgun. Then he stepped back. "Any second now."

The line still hung down to the float below, but now the tide was almost at ebb, and instead of being slack like it was the day of the murder, it was almost taut.

"Now, then, everybody watch," said Dan Peavy.

"Any second—" Jerry started to say again. But he was interrupted by three things in rapid succession. First, there was a mighty blast as the fishing rod pulled the trigger of the gun. Second, the recoil sent the gun sailing out to splash into the boat slip and disappear. And third, Fred Trent let out a yell and made a lunge for the door.

He was halfway to the main road before Jerry and I caught up to him in the patrol car.

Fred Trent confessed that he had killed Hibler for revenge and money. After he had paid Hibler the twenty-five dollars the morning of the day of the murder, Trent drove away from the house. But he stopped be-

yond a clump of bushes, sneaked back, and peeped through a window. He saw Hibler stashing the money away, waited till Bernie came outside, and conked him on the head. He had figured out what he was going to do, and he carried the unconscious man to the boathouse, tied him to the beam. The blindfold was so Hibler wouldn't see what was in store for him, and maybe twist loose or at least get out of the line of fire. The gag was just in case somebody came around during the day.

Trent had figured the tide carefully. At seven that morning the tide was coming in. He rigged up the murder apparatus, reeling off just enough line so that it would tighten an hour before low tide in the afternoon. When everything was set, he took Hibler's money, messed the house up to try to throw a wrench into the investigation, then drove on into town to set up an alibi that nobody could question.

At four that afternoon he had gone across the street to the Bon Air for a cup of coffee. He had phoned Mollie from there, acting like he was Hibler and telling her to come out to talk about Sam Hammond's money. Mollie, as he knew, would give us a first-class suspect. About the time he was talking to Mol-

lie, the shotgun discharged out at Hibler's.

Well, we had Trent behind bars where he belonged, and Dan Peavy answered a few questions.

"What put you onto Trent?" I asked him. "Especially since you were his alibi?"

"First off," he said, giving Mollie a paternal smile, "I couldn't bring myself to believe Mollie could do a thing like that. Then there was all that fishin' tackle layin' around the boathouse, and I knew Hibler was too good a fisherman to waste his time in a northeaster. Course, there was Fred Trent himself, working like a dog all day, with just a couple of short coffee breaks. He never was outta sight the whole day, and that just wasn't like Fred Trent." He grinned and looked over at Jerry. "And there was Deputy Sealey's night out at Gus Johnson's place when that gun kicked 'em both into the creek. It hit me all of a sudden, later on, that that was how the gun was gotten rid of. And sure enough, when I had Jerry take a swim in Hibler's boat slip, there it was, right on the bottom, where it had been all along."

Mollie Hammond came over to the desk and leaned and gave Dan a kiss on the cheek. "I don't care how you did it,

Sheriff Peavy. I'm just glad you did."

She was mighty pretty when she smiled. I noticed, too, that she had done something to her hair, and she was wearing lipstick. Of course, Sam hadn't

been dead long but when a bit more time had passed, it would be perfectly proper for me to call on her.

Besides, Juanita and Thelma both might do well with a little competition.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Masque of the Red Death

by Edgar Allan Poe

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellowmen. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease were the incidents of half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and lighthearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress nor egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different as might have been expected from the duke's love of the bizarre. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left,

in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire, that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and

sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies), there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

But in spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colors and effects. He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be *sure* that he was not.

He had directed, in great part, the movable embellishments of the seven chambers upon occasion of this great *fête*; and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been since seen in *Hernani*. There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—they have endured but an instant—and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many-tinted windows through which stream the rays from the tripods. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier

light through the blood-colored panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of the waltzers were quieted; and there was an uneasy cessation of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened, perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who revelled. And thus too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumor of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise —then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation. In truth, the masquerade license of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad revellers around. But the mummer had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in *blood*—and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this spectral image (which, with a slow and solemn movement, as if more fully to sustain its role, stalked to and fro among the waltzers), he was seen to be convulsed in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste; but in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

"Who dares—" he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near him "—who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!"

It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which stood the Prince Prospero as he uttered these words. They rang throughout the seven rooms loudly and clearly, for the prince was a bold and robust man, and the music had become hushed at the waving of his hand.

It was in the blue room where stood the prince, with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing movement of this group in the direction of the intruder, who at the moment was also near at hand, and now, with deliberate and stately step, made closer approach to the speaker. But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were found none who put forth hand to seize him; so that, unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the prince's person; and, while the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centers of the rooms to the walls, he made his way uninterruptedly, but with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet, ere a decided movement had been made to arrest him. It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers, while none followed him on account of a deadly terror that had seized upon all. He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterward, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black

apartment, and, seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpselike mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form.

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

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